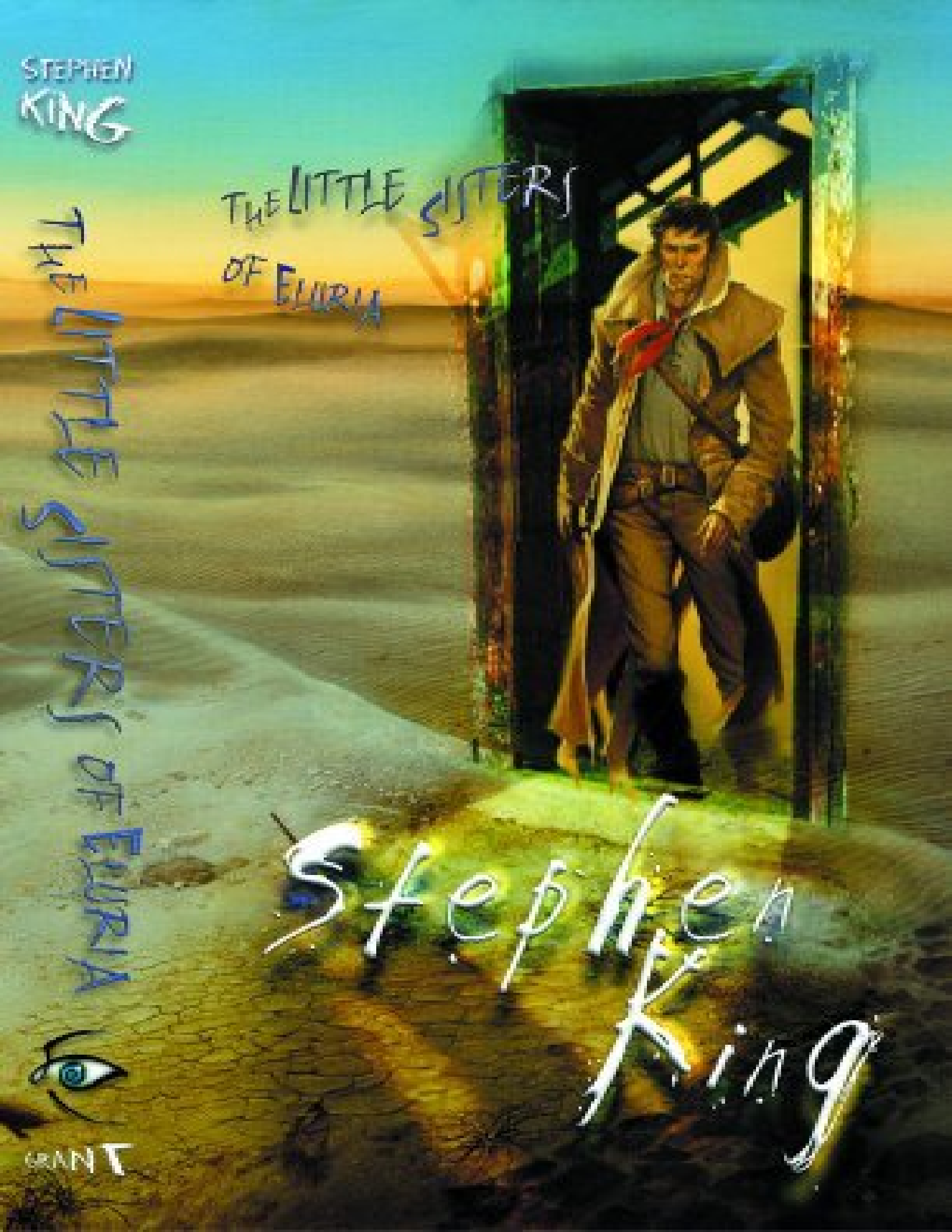

STEPHEN
KING
THE LITTLE SISTERS OF ELURIA
Stephen King
GRANT

THE DARK TOWER
STEPHEN KING
The Gunslinger (1982)
The Drawing of the Three (1987)
The Waste Lands (1991)
Wizard and Glass (1997)

These novels, using thematic elements from Robert Browning's poem *'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came'.* tell the saga of Roland, last of the gunslingers, who embarks on a quest to find the Dark Tower for reasons that the author has yet to reveal. Along the way, Roland encounters the remains of what was once a thriving society, feudal in nature but technologically quite advanced, that now has fallen into decay and ruin. King combines elements of fantasy with science fiction into a surreal blend of past and future.

The first book, *The Gunslinger,* introduces Roland, who is chasing the Dark Man, an enigmatic sorcerer figure, across a vast desert. Through flashbacks, the reader learns that Roland was a member of a noble family in the Dark Tower world, and that that world may or may not have been destroyed with help from the Dark Man. Along the way, Roland encounters strange inhabitants of this unnamed world, including Jake, a young boy who, even though he is killed by the end of the first book, will figure prominently in later volumes. Roland does catch up with the Dark Man, and learns that he must seek out the Dark Tower to find the answers to the questions of why he must embark on this quest and what is contained in the Tower.

The next book, *The Drawing of the Three,* shows Roland recruiting three people from present-day Earth to join him on his way to the Dark Tower. They are Eddie, a junkie 'mule' working for the Mafia; Suzannah, a paraplegic with multiple personalities; and Jake, whose arrival is startling to Roland, who sacrificed Jake in his own world during his pursuit of the Dark Man. Roland saves Jake's life on Earth, but the resulting schism nearly drives him insane. Roland must also help the other two battle their own demons, Eddie's being his heroin

addiction and guilt over not being able to save his brother's life, and Suzannah's the war between her different personalities, one a kind and gentle woman, the other a racist psychopath. Each of the three deals with their problems with the help of the others, and together the quartet set out on the journey to the Tower.

The third book, *The Waste Lands,* chronicles the first leg of that journey, examining the background of the three Earth-born characters in detail. The book reaches its climax when Jake is kidnapped by a cult thriving in the ruins of a crumbling city, led by a man known only as Flagg (a character who has appeared in several of King's other novels as the embodiment of pure evil). Roland rescues Jake and the group escapes the city on a monorail system whose artificial intelligence program has achieved sentience at the cost of its sanity. The monorail challenges them to a riddle-contest, with their lives as the prize if they can stump the machine, who claims to know every riddle ever created.

Wizard and Glass,
the fourth volume in the series, finds Roland, Jake, Eddie and Suzannah continuing their journey towards the Dark Tower, moving through a deserted part of Mid-World that is eerily reminiscent of twentieth-century Earth. During their travels they encounter a *thinny,* a dangerous weakening of the barrier between different times and places. Roland recognizes it and realizes that his world is breaking down faster than he had thought. The *thinny* prompts him to recall the first time he encountered it, many years before on a trip out west with his friends Cuthbert and Alain, when Roland had just earned his gunslinger status. It is this story - of the three boys uncovering a plot against the ruling government and of Roland's first love, a girl named Susan Delgado - that is the central focus of the book. While the three manage to destroy the conspirators, Susan is killed during the fight by the townspeople of Hambry. The story gives Jake, Eddie and Suzannah new insight into Roland's background and why he may sacrifice them to attain his ultimate goal of saving his

world. The book ends with the foursome moving onward once more towards the Tower.

THE LITTLE SISTERS OF ELURIA

BY STEPHEN KING

[Author's Note: The Dark Tower books begin with Roland of Gilead, the last gunslinger in an exhausted world that has 'moved on', pursuing a magician in a black robe. Roland has been chasing Walter for a very long time. In the first book of the cycle, he finally catches up. This story, however, takes place while Roland is still casting about for Walter's trail. A knowledge of the books is therefore not necessary for you to understand - and hopefully enjoy -the story which follows. S.K.]

I. Full Earth. The Empty Town. The Bells. The Dead Boy.

The Overturned Wagon. The Green Folk.

On a day in Full Earth so hot that it seemed to suck the breath from his chest before his body could use it, Roland of Gilead came to the gates of a village in the Desatoya Mountains. He was travelling alone by then, and would soon be travelling afoot, as well. This whole last week he had been hoping for a horse-doctor, but guessed such a fellow would do him no good now, even if this town had one. His mount, a two-year-old roan, was pretty well done for.

The town gates, still decorated with flowers from some festival or other, stood open and welcoming, but the silence beyond them was all wrong. The gunslinger heard no clip-clop of horses, no rumble of wagon-wheels, no merchants' huckstering cries from the marketplace. The only sounds were the low hum of crickets (some sort of bug, at any rate; they were a bit more tuneful than crickets, at that), a queer wooden knocking sound, and the faint, dreamy tinkle of small bells.

Also, the flowers twined through the wrought-iron staves of the ornamental gate were long dead.

Between his knees, Topsy gave two great, hollow sneezes - *K'chow! K'chow! - and* staggered sideways. Roland

dismounted, partly out of respect for the horse, partly out of respect for himself - he didn't want to break a leg under Topsy if Topsy chose this moment to give up and canter into the clearing at the end of his path.

The gunslinger stood in his dusty boots and faded jeans under the beating sun, stroking the roan's matted neck, pausing every now and then to yank his fingers through the tangles of Topsy's mane, and stopping once to shoo off the tiny flies clustering at the corners of Topsy's eyes. Let them lay their eggs and hatch their maggots there after Topsy was dead, but not before.

Roland thus honoured his horse as best he could, listening to those distant, dreamy bells and the strange wooden tocking sound as he did. After a while he ceased his absent grooming and looked thoughtfully at the open gate.

The cross above its centre was a bit unusual, but otherwise the gate was a typical example of its type, a western commonplace which was not useful but traditional - all the little towns he had come to in the last tenmonth seemed to have one such where you came in (grand) and one more such where you went out (not so grand). None had been built to exclude visitors, certainly not this one. It stood between two walls of pink adobe that ran into the scree for a distance of about twenty feet on either side of the road and then simply stopped. Close the gate, lock it with many locks, and all that meant was a short walk around one bit of adobe wall or the other.

Beyond the gate, Roland could see what looked in most respects like a perfectly ordinary High Street - an inn, two saloons (one of which was called The Bustling Pig; the sign over the other was too faded to read), a mercantile, a smithy, a Gathering Hall. There was also a small but rather lovely wooden building with a modest bell-tower on top, a sturdy fieldstone foundation on bottom, and a gold-painted cross on its double doors. The cross, like the one over the gate, marked this as a worshipping place for those who held to the Jesus-man. This wasn't a common religion in Mid-

World, but far from unknown; that same thing could have been said about most forms of worship in those days, including the worship of Baal, Asmodeus, and a hundred others. Faith, like everything else in the world these days, had moved on. As far as Roland was concerned, God o' the Cross was just another religion which taught that love and murder were inextricably bound together - that in the end, God always drank blood.

Meanwhile, there was the singing hum of insects which sounded *almost* like crickets. The dreamlike tinkle of the bells. And that queer wooden thumping, like a fist on a door. Or on a coffin top.

Something here's a long way from right, the gunslinger thought. *Ware, Roland; this place has a reddish odour.*

He led Topsy through the gate with its adornments of dead flowers and down the High Street. On the porch of the mercantile, where the old men should have congregated to discuss crops, politics, and the follies of the younger generation, there stood only a line of empty rockers. Lying beneath one, as if dropped from a careless (and long-departed) hand, was a charred corncob pipe. The hitching-rack in front of The Bustling Pig stood empty; the windows of the saloon itself were dark. One of the batwing doors had been yanked off and stood propped against the side of the building; the other hung ajar, its faded green slats splattered with maroon stuff that might have been paint but probably wasn't.

The shopfront of the livery stable stood intact, like the face of a ruined woman who has access to good cosmetics, but the double barn behind it was a charred skeleton. That fire must have happened on a rainy day, the gunslinger thought, or the whole damned town would have gone up in flames; a jolly spin and raree for anyone around to see it.

To his right now, halfway up to where the street opened into the town square, was the church. There were grassy borders on both sides, one separating the church from the

town's Gathering Hall, the other from the little house set aside for the preacher and his family (if this was one of the Jesus-sects which allowed its shamans to have wives and families, that was; some of them, clearly administered by lunatics, demanded at least the appearance of celibacy). There were flowers in these grassy strips, and while they looked parched, most were still alive. So whatever had happened here to empty the place out had not happened long ago. A week, perhaps. Two at the outside, given the heat.

Topsy sneezed again - K'chow! - *and* lowered his head wearily.

The gunslinger saw the source of the tinkling. Above the cross on the church doors, a cord had been strung in a long, shallow arc. Hung from it were perhaps two dozen tiny silver bells. There was hardly any breeze today, but enough so these small bells were never quite still ... and if a real wind should rise, Roland thought, the sound made by the tintinnabulation of the bells would probably be a good deal less pleasant; more like the strident parley of gossips' tongues.

'Hello!' Roland called, looking across the street at what a large falsefronted sign proclaimed to be the Good Beds Hotel. 'Hello, the town!'

No answer but the bells, the tunesome insects, and that odd wooden clunking. No answer, no movement ... but there were folk here. Folk or *something.* He was being watched. The tiny hairs on the nape of his neck had stiffened.

Roland stepped onward, leading Topsy towards the centre of town, puffing up the unlaid High Street dust with each step. Forty paces further along, he stopped in front of a low building marked with a single curt word: LAW. The Sheriffs office (if they had such this far from the Inners) looked remarkably similar to the church - wooden boards stained a rather forbidding shade of dark brown above a stone foundation.

The bells behind him rustled and whispered.

He left the roan standing in the middle of the street and mounted the steps to the LAW office. He was very aware of the bells, the sun beating against his neck, and of the sweat trickling down his sides. The door was shut but unlocked. He opened it, then winced back, half-raising a hand as the heat trapped inside rushed out in a soundless gasp. If all the closed buildings were this hot inside, he mused, the livery barns would soon not be the only burned-out hulks. And with no rain to stop the flames (and certainly no volunteer fire department, not any more), the town would not be long for the face of the earth.

He stepped inside, trying to sip at the stifling air rather than taking deep breaths. He immediately heard the low drone of flies.

There was a single cell, commodious and empty, its barred door standing open. Filthy skin-shoes, one of the pair coming unsewn, lay beneath a bunk sodden with the same dried maroon stuff which had marked The Bustling Pig. Here was where the flies were, crawling over the stain, feeding from it.

On the desk was a ledger. Roland turned it towards him and read what was embossed upon its red cover:

REGISTRY OF MISDEEDS & REDRESS
IN THE YEARS OF OUR LORD
ELURIA

So now he knew the name of the town, at least - Eluria. Pretty, yet somehow ominous, as well. But any name would have seemed ominous, Roland supposed, given these circumstances. He turned to leave, and saw a closed door secured by a wooden bolt.

He went to it, stood before it for a moment, then drew one of the big revolvers he carried low on his hips. He stood a moment longer, head down, thinking (Cuthbert, his old friend, liked to say that the wheels inside Roland's head ground slow but exceedingly fine), and then retracted the bolt. He opened the door and immediately stood back, levelling his gun, expecting a body (Eluria's Sheriff,

mayhap) to come tumbling into the room with his throat cut and his eyes gouged out, victim of a MISDEED in need of REDRESS

Nothing.

Well, half a dozen stained jumpers which longer-term prisoners probably required to wear, two bows, a quiver of arrows, an old, dusty motor, a rifle that had probably last been fired a hundred years agog and a mop ... but in the gunslinger's mind, all that came down to nothing. Just a storage closet.

He went back to the desk, opened the register, and leafed through it. Even the pages were warm, as if the book had been baked. In a way, he supposed it had been. If the High Street layout had been different, he might have expected a large number of religious offences to be recorded, but he wasn't surprised to find none here - if the Jesus-man church had coexisted with a couple of saloons, the churchfolk must have been fairly reasonable.

What Roland found were the usual petty offences, and a few not so petty - a murder, a horse-thieving, the Distressal of a Lady (which probably meant rape). The murderer had been removed to a place called Lexingworth to be hanged. Roland had never heard of it. One note towards the end read *Green folk sent hence.* It meant nothing to Roland. The most recent entry was this: *12/Fe/99. Chas. Freeborn, cattle-theef to be tryed.*

Roland wasn't familiar with the notation *12/Fe/99,* but as this was a long stretch from February, he supposed *Fe* might stand for Full Earth. In any case, the ink looked about as fresh as the blood on the bunk in the cell, and the gunslinger had a good idea that Chas. Freeborn, cattle-theef, had reached the clearing at the end of his path.

He went out into the heat and the lacy sound of bells. Topsy looked at Roland dully, then lowered his head again, as if there were something in the dust of the High Street which could be cropped. As if he would ever want to crop again, for that matter.

The gunslinger gathered up the reins, slapped the dust off them against the faded no-colour of his jeans, and continued on up the street. The wooden knocking sound grew steadily louder as he walked (he had not holstered his gun when leaving LAW, nor cared to holster it now), and as he neared the town square, which must have housed the Eluria market in more normal times, Roland at last saw movement.

On the far side of the square was a long watering trough, made of iron-wood from the look (what some called 'seequoiah' out here), apparently fed in happier times from a rusty steel pipe which now jutted waterless above the trough's south end. Lolling over one side of this municipal oasis, about halfway down its length, was a leg clad in faded grey pants and terminating in a well-chewed cowboy boot.

The chewer was a large dog, perhaps two shades greyer than the corduroy pants. Under other circumstances, Roland supposed the mutt would have had the boot off long since, but perhaps the foot and lower calf inside it had swelled. In any case, the dog was well on its way to simply chewing the obstacle away. It would seize the boot and shake it back and forth. Every now and then the boot's heel would collide with the wooden side of the trough, producing another hollow knock. The gunslinger hadn't been so wrong to think of coffin tops after all, it seemed.

Why doesn't it just back off a few steps, jump into the trough, and have at him?
Roland wondered. *No water coming out of the pipe, so it can't be afraid of drowning.*

Topsy uttered another of his hollow, tired sneezes, and when the dog lurched around in response, Roland understood why it was doing things the hard way. One of its front legs had been badly broken and crookedly mended. Walking would be a chore for it, jumping out of the question. On its chest was a patch of dirty white fur. Growing out of this patch was black fur in a roughly cruciform shape. A Jesus-dog, mayhap, hoping for a spot of afternoon communion.

There was nothing very religious about the snarl which began to wind out of its chest, however, or the roll of its rheumy eyes. It lifted its upper lip in a trembling sneer, revealing a goodish set of teeth.

'Light out,' Roland said. 'While you can.'

The dog backed up until its hindquarters were pressed against the chewed boot. It regarded the oncoming man fearfully, but clearly meant to stand its ground. The revolver in Roland's hand held no significance for it. The gunslinger wasn't surprised - he guessed the dog had never seen one, had no idea it was anything other than a club of some kind, which could only be thrown once.

'Hie on with you, now,' Roland said, but still the dog wouldn't move.

He should have shot it - it was no good to itself, and a dog that had acquired a taste for human flesh could be no good to anyone else - but he somehow didn't like to. Killing the only thing still living in this town (other than the singing bugs, that was) seemed like an invitation to bad luck.

He fired into the dust near the dog's good forepaw, the sound crashing into the hot day and temporarily silencing the insects. The dog *could* run, it seemed, although at a lurching trot that hurt Roland's eyes ... and his heart, a little, too. It stopped at the far side of the square, by an overturned flatbed wagon (there looked to be more dried blood splashed on the freighter's side), and glanced back. It uttered a forlorn howl that raised the hairs on the nape of Roland's neck even further.

Then it turned, skirted the wrecked wagon, and limped down a lane which opened between two of the stalls. This way towards Eluria's back gate, Roland guessed.

Still leading his dying horse, the gunslinger crossed the square to the ironwood trough and looked in.

The owner of the chewed boot wasn't a man but a boy who had just been beginning to get his man's growth - and that would have been quite a large growth indeed, Roland judged, even setting aside the bloating effects which had

resulted from being immersed for some unknown length of time in nine inches of water simmering under a summer sun.

The boy's eyes, now just milky balls, stared blindly up at the gunslinger like the eyes of a statue. His hair appeared to be the white of old age, although that was the effect of the water; he had likely been a towhead. His clothes were those of a cowboy, although he couldn't have been much more than fourteen or sixteen. Around his neck, gleaming blearily in water that was slowly turning into a skin stew under the summer sun, was a gold medallion.

Roland reached into the water, not liking to but feeling a certain obligation. He wrapped his fingers around the medallion and pulled. The chain parted, and he lifted the thing, dripping, into the air.

He rather expected a Jesus-man sigil - what was called the crucifix or the rood -but a small rectangle hung from the chain, instead. The object looked like pure gold. Engraved into it was this legend:

James

Loved of Family, Loved of GOD

Roland, who had been almost too revolted to reach into the polluted water (as a younger man, he could never have brought himself to that), was now glad he'd done it. He might never run into any of those who had loved this boy, but he knew enough of *ka* to think it might be so. In any case, it was the right thing. So was giving the kid a decent burial ... assuming, that was, he could get the body out of the trough without having it break apart inside the clothes.

Roland was considering this, trying to balance what might be his duty in this circumstance against his growing desire to get out of this town, when Topsy finally fell dead.

The roan went over with a creak of gear and a last whuffling groan as it hit the ground. Roland turned and saw eight people in the street, walking towards him in a line, like beaters who hope to flush out birds or drive small game. Their skin was waxy green. Folk wearing such skin would likely glow in the dark like ghosts. It was hard to tell their

sex, and what could it matter - to them or anyone else? They were slow mutants, walking with the hunched deliberation of corpses reanimated by some arcane magic.

The dust had muffled their feet like carpet. With the dog banished, they might well have gotten within attacking distance if Topsy hadn't done Roland the favour of dying at such an opportune moment. No guns that Roland could see; they were armed with clubs. These were chair-legs and table-legs, for the most part, but Roland saw one that looked made rather than seized - it had a bristle of rusty nails sticking out of it, and he suspected it had once - been the property of a saloon bouncer, possibly

the one who kept school in The Bustling Pig.

Roland raised his pistol, aiming at the fellow in the centre of the line. Now he could hear the shuffle of their feet, and the wet snuffle of their breathing. As if they all had bad chest-colds.

Came out of the mines, most likely,
Roland thought. *There are radium mines somewhere about. That would account for the skin. I wonder that the sun doesn't kill them.*

Then, as he watched, the one on the end - a creature with a face like melted candle-wax - *did* die ... or collapsed, at any rate. He (Roland was quite sure it was a male) went to his knees with a low, gobbling cry, groping for the hand of the thing walking next to him - something with a lumpy bald head and red sores sizzling on its neck. This creature took no notice of its fallen companion, but kept its dim eyes on Roland, lurching along in rough step with its remaining companions.

'Stop where you are!' Roland said. "Ware me, if you'd live to see day's end! 'Ware me very well!'

He spoke mostly to the one in the centre, who wore ancient red suspenders over rags of shirt, and a filthy bowler hat. This gent had only one good eye, and it peered at the gunslinger with a greed as horrible as it was unmistakable. The one beside Bowler Hat (Roland believed this one might

be a woman, with the dangling vestiges of breasts beneath the vest it wore) threw the chair-leg it held. The arc was true, but the missile fell ten yards short.

Roland thumbed back the trigger of his revolver and fired again. This time the dirt displaced by the slug kicked up on the tattered remains of Bowler Hat's shoe instead of on a lame dog's paw.

The green folk didn't run as the dog had, but they stopped, staring at him with their dull greed. Had the missing folk of Eluria finished up in these creatures' stomachs? Roland couldn't believe it . . . although he knew perfectly well that such as these held no scruple against cannibalism. (And perhaps it wasn't cannibalism, not really; how could such things as these be considered human, whatever they might once have been?) They were too slow, too stupid. If they had dared come back into town after the Sheriff had run them out, they would have been burned or stoned to death.

Without thinking about what he was doing, wanting only to free his other hand to draw his second gun if the apparitions didn't see reason, Roland stuffed the medallion which he had taken from the dead boy into the pocket of his jeans, pushing the broken fine-link chain in after.

They stood staring at him, their strangely twisted shadows drawn out behind them. What next? Tell them to go back where they'd come from? Roland didn't know if they'd do it, and in any case had decided he liked them best where he could see them. And at least there was no question now about staying to bury the boy named James; that conundrum had been solved.

'Stand steady,' he said in the low speech, beginning to retreat. 'First fellow that moves -'

Before he could finish, one of them - a thick-chested troll with a pouty toad's mouth and what looked like gills on the sides of his wattled neck - lunged forward, gibbering in a high-pitched and peculiarly flabby voice.

It might have been a species of laughter. He was waving what looked like a piano-leg.

Roland fired. Mr Toad's chest caved in like a bad piece of roofing. He ran backwards several steps, trying to catch his balance and clawing at his chest with the hand not holding the piano-leg. His feet, clad in dirty red velvet slippers with curled-up toes, tangled in each other and he fell over, making a queer and somehow lonely gargling sound. He let go of his club, rolled over on one side, tried to rise, and then fell back into the dust. The brutal sun glared into his open eyes, and as Roland watched, white tendrils of steam began to rise from his skin, which was rapidly losing its green undertint. There was also a hissing sound, like a gob of spit on top of a hot stove.

Saves explaining, at least,
Roland thought, and swept his eyes over the others. 'All right; he was the first one to move. Who wants to be the second?'

None did, it seemed. They only stood there, watching him, not coming at him ... but not retreating, either. He thought (as he had about the crucifix-dog) that he should kill them as they stood there, just draw his other gun and mow them down. It would be the work of seconds only, and child's play to his gifted hands, even if some ran. But he couldn't.

Not just cold, like that. He wasn't that kind of killer ... at least, not yet.

Very slowly, he began to step backwards, first bending his course around the watering trough, then putting it between him and them. When Bowler Hat took a step forward, Roland didn't give the others in the line a chance to copy him; he put a bullet into the dust of High Street an inch in advance of Bowler Hat's foot.

'That's your last warning,' he said, still using the low speech. He had no idea if they understood it, didn't really care. He guessed they caught this tune's music well enough. 'Next bullet I fire eats up someone's heart. The way it works

is, you stay and I go. You get this one chance. Follow me, and you all die. It's too hot to play games and I've lost my -'

'Booh!' cried a rough, liquidy voice from behind him. There was unmistakable glee in it. Roland saw a shadow grow from the shadow of the overturned freight wagon, which he had now almost reached, and had just time to understand that another of the green folk had been hiding beneath it.

As he began to turn, a club crashed down on Roland's shoulder, numbing his right arm all the way to the wrist. He held on to the gun and fired once, but the bullet went into one of the wagon-wheels, smashing a wooden spoke and turning the wheel on its hub with a high screeching sound. Behind him, he heard the green folk in the street uttering hoarse, yapping cries as they charged forward.

The thing which had been hiding beneath the overturned wagon was a monster with two heads growing out of his neck, one with the vestigial, slack face of a corpse. The other, although just as green, was more lively. Broad lips spread in a cheerful grin as he raised his club to strike again.

Roland drew with his left hand - the one that wasn't numbed and distant. He had time to put one bullet through the bushwhacker's grin, flinging him backwards in a spray of blood and teeth, the bludgeon flying out of his relaxing fingers. Then the others were on him, clubbing and drubbing.

The gunslinger was able to slip the first couple of blows, and there was one moment when he thought he might be able to spin around to the rear of the overturned wagon, spin and turn and go to work with his guns. Surely he would be able to do that. Surely his quest for the Dark Tower wasn't supposed to end on the sun-blasted street of a little far-western town called Eluria, at the hands of half a dozen green-skinned slow mutants. Surely ka could not be so cruel.

But Bowler Hat caught him with a vicious sidehand blow, and Roland crashed into the wagon's slowly spinning rear wheel instead of skirting around it. As he went to his hands and knees, still scrambling and trying to turn, trying to

evade the blows which rained down on him, he saw there were now many more than half a dozen. Coming up the street towards the town square were at least thirty green men and women. This wasn't a clan but a damned *tribe* of them. And in broad, hot daylight! Slow mutants were, in his experience, creatures that loved the dark, almost like toadstools with brains, and he had never seen any such as these before. They -

The one in the red vest was female. Her bare breasts swinging beneath the dirty red vest were the last things he saw clearly as they gathered around and above him, bashing away with their clubs. The one with the nails studded in it came down on his lower right calf, sinking its stupid rusty fangs in deep. He tried again to raise one of the big guns (his vision was fading, now, but that wouldn't help them if he got to shooting; he had always been the most hellishly talented of them; Jamie DeCurry had once proclaimed that Roland could shoot blindfolded, because he had eyes in his fingers), and it was kicked out of his hand and into the dust. Although he could still feel the smooth sandalwood grip of the other, he thought it was nevertheless already gone.

He could smell them - the rich, rotted smell of decaying meat. Or was that only his hands, as he raised them in a feeble and useless effort to protect his head? His hands, which had been in the polluted water where flecks and strips of the dead boy's skin floated?

The clubs slamming down on him, slamming down all over him, as if the green folk wanted not just to beat him to death but to tenderize him as they did so. And as he went down into the darkness of what he most certainly believed would be his death, he heard the bugs singing, the dog he had spared barking, and the bells hung on the church door ringing. These sounds merged together into strangely sweet music. Then that was gone, too; the darkness ate it all.

II. Rising. Hanging Suspended. White Beauty. Two Others. The Medallion.

The gunslinger's return to the world wasn't like coming back to consciousness after a blow, which he'd done several times before, and it wasn't like waking from sleep, either. It was like rising.

I'm dead,

he thought at some point during this process ... when the power to think had been at least partially restored to him. *Dead and rising into whatever afterlife there is. That's what it must be. The singing I hear is the singing of dead souls.*

Total blackness gave way to the dark grey of rainclouds, then to the lighter grey of fog. This brightened to the uniform clarity of a heavy mist moments before the sun breaks through. And through it all was that sense of *rising,* as if he had been caught in some mild but powerful updraught.

As the sense of rising began to diminish and the brightness behind his eyelids grew, Roland at last began to believe he was still alive. It was the singing that convinced him. Not dead souls, not the heavenly host of angels sometimes described by the Jesus-man preachers, but only those bugs. A little like crickets, but sweeter-voiced. The ones he had heard in Eluria.

On this thought, he opened his eyes.

His belief that he was still alive was severely tried, for Roland found himself hanging suspended in a world of white beauty - his first bewildered thought was that he was in the sky, floating within a fair-weather cloud. All around him was the reedy singing of the bugs. Now he could hear the tinkling of bells, too.

He tried to turn his head and swayed in some sort of harness. He could hear it creaking. The soft singing of the bugs, like crickets in the grass at the end of day back home in Gilead, hesitated and broke rhythm. When it did, what felt like a tree of pain grew up Roland's back. He had no idea what its burning branches might be, but the trunk was surely his spine. A far deadlier pain sank into one of his lower legs ~ in his confusion, the gunslinger could not tell

which one. *That's where the club with the nails in it got me,* he thought. And more pain in his head. His skull felt like a badly cracked egg. He cried out, and could hardly believe that the harsh crow's caw he heard came from his own throat. He thought he could also hear, very faintly, the barking of the cross-dog, but surely that was his imagination.

Am I dying? Have I awakened once more at the very end?

A hand stroked his brow. He could feel it but not see it - fingers trailing across his skin ' pausing here and there to massage a knot or a line. Delicious, like a drink of cool water on a hot day. He began to close his eyes, and then a horrible idea came to him: suppose that hand were green, its owner wearing a tattered red vest over her hanging dugs?

What if it is? What could you do?

'Hush, man,' a young woman's voice said ... or perhaps it was the voice of a girl. Certainly the first person Roland thought of was Susan, the girl from Mejis, she who had spoken to him as *thee.*

'Where ... where . . .'

'Hush, stir not. 'Tis far too soon.'

The pain in his back was subsiding now, but the image of the pain as a tree remained, for his very skin seemed to be moving like leaves in a light breeze. How could that be?

He let the question go - let all questions go - and concentrated on the small, cool hand stroking his brow.

'Hush, pretty man, God's love be upon ye. Yet it's sore hurt ye are. Be still. Heal.'

The dog had hushed its barking (if it had ever been there in the first place), and Roland became aware of that low, creaking sound again. It reminded him of horse-tethers, or something - *hangropes - he* didn't like to think of. Now he believed he could feel pressure beneath his thighs, his buttocks, and perhaps . . . yes ... his shoulders.

I'm not in a bed at all. I think I'm above *a bed. Can that be?*

He supposed he could be in a sling. He seemed to remember once, as a boy, that some fellow had been suspended that way in the horse-doctor's room behind the Great Hall. A stablehand who had been burned too badly by kerosene to be laid in a bed. The man had died, but not soon enough; for two nights, his shrieks had filled the sweet summer air of the Gathering Fields.

Am I burned, then, nothing but a cinder with legs, hanging in a sling?

The fingers touched the centre of his brow, rubbing away the frown forming there. And it was as if the voice which went with the hand had read his thoughts, picking them up with the tips of her clever, soothing fingers.

'Ye'll be fine if God wills, sai,' the voice which went with the hand said. 'But time belongs to God, not to you.'

No, he would have said, if he had been able. *Time belongs to the Tower.*

Then he slipped down again, descending as smoothly as he had risen, going away from the hand and the dreamlike sounds of the singing insects and chiming bells. There was an interval that might have been sleep, or perhaps unconsciousness, but he never went all the way back down.

At one point he thought he heard the girl's voice, although he couldn't be sure, because this time it was raised in fury, or fear, or both. 'No!' she cried. 'Ye can't have it off him and ye know it! Go your course and stop talking of it, do!'

When he rose back to consciousness the second time, he was no stronger in body, but a little more himself in mind. What he saw when he opened his eyes wasn't the inside of a cloud, but at first that same phrase - white beauty - recurred to him. It was in some ways the most beautiful place Roland had ever been in his life ... partially because he still *had* a life, of course, but mostly because it was so fey and peaceful.

It was a huge room, high and long. When Roland at last turned his head - cautiously, so cautiously - to take its measure as well as he could, he thought it must run at least

two hundred yards from end to end. It was built narrow, but its height gave the place a feeling of tremendous airiness.

There were no walls or ceilings such as those he was familiar with, although it was a little like being in a vast tent. Above him, the sun struck and diffused its light across billowy panels of thin white silk, turning them into the bright swags which he had first mistaken for clouds. Beneath this silk canopy, the room was as grey as twilight. The walls, also silk, rippled like sails in a faint breeze. Hanging from each wall-panel was a curved rope bearing small bells. These lay against the fabric and rang in low and charming unison, like wind-chimes, when the walls rippled.

An aisle ran down the centre of the long room; on either side of it were scores of beds, each made up with clean white sheets and headed with crisp white pillows. There were perhaps forty on the far side of the aisle, all empty, and another forty on Roland's side. There were two other occupied beds here, one next to Roland on his left. This fellow –

It's the boy. The one who was in the trough.

The idea ran goosebumps up Roland's arms and gave him a nasty, superstitious start. He peered more closely at the sleeping boy.

Can't be. You're just dazed, that's all; it can't be.

Yet closer scrutiny refused to dispel the idea. It certainly *seemed* to be the boy from the trough, probably ill (why else would he be in a place like this?) but far from dead; Roland could see the slow rise and fall of his chest, and the occasional twitch of the fingers which dangled over the side of the bed.

You didn't get a good enough look at him to be sure of anything, and after a few days in that trough, his own mother couldn't have said for sure who it was.

But Roland, who'd had a mother, knew better than that. He also knew that he'd seen the gold medallion around the boy's neck. just before the attack of the green folk, he had taken it from this lad's corpse and put it in his pocket. Now

someone - the proprietors of this place, most likely, they who had sorcerously restored the lad named James to his interrupted life - had taken it back from Roland and put it around the boy's neck again.

Had the girl with the wonderfully cool hand done that? Did she in consequence think Roland a ghoul who would steal from the dead? He didn't like to think so. In fact, the notion made him more uncomfortable than the idea that the young cowboy's bloated body had been somehow returned to its normal size and then reanimated.

Further down the aisle on this side, perhaps a dozen empty beds away from the boy and Roland Deschain, the gunslinger saw a third inmate of this queer infirmary. This fellow looked at least four times the age of the lad, twice the age of the gunslinger. He had a long beard, more grey than black, that hung to his upper chest in two straggly forks. The face above it was sun-darkened, heavily lined, and pouched beneath the eyes. Running from his left cheek and across the bridge of his nose was a thick dark mark which Roland took to be a scar. The bearded man was either asleep or unconscious - Roland could hear him snoring - and was suspended three feet above his bed, held up by a complex series of white belts that glimmered in the dim air. These crisscrossed each other, making a series of figure eights all the way around the man's body. He looked like a bug in some exotic spider's web. He wore a gauzy white bed-dress. One of the belts ran beneath his buttocks, elevating his crotch in a way that seemed to offer the bulge of his privates to the grey and dreaming air. Further down his body, Roland could see the dark shadow-shapes of his legs. They appeared to be twisted like ancient dead trees. Roland didn't like to think in how many places they must have been broken to look like that. And yet they appeared to be *moving.* How could they be, if the bearded man was unconscious? It was a trick of the light, perhaps, or of the shadows ... perhaps the gauzy singlet the man was wearing was stirring in a light breeze, or ...

Roland looked away, up at the billowy silk panels high above, trying to control the accelerating beat of his heart. What he saw hadn't been caused by the wind, or a shadow, or anything else. The man's legs were somehow moving without moving ... as Roland had seemed to feel his own back moving without moving. He didn't know what could cause such a phenomenon, and didn't want to know, at least not yet.

'I'm not ready,' he whispered. His lips felt very dry. He closed his eyes again, wanting to sleep, wanting not to think about what the bearded man's twisted legs might indicate about his own condition. But –

But you'd better
get *ready.*

That was the voice that always seemed to come when he tried to slack off, to scamp a job, or take the easy way around an obstacle. It was the voice of Cort, his old teacher. The man whose stick they had all feared, as boys. They hadn't feared his stick as much as his mouth, however. His jeers when they were weak, his contempt when they complained or tried whining about their lot.

Are you a gunslinger, Roland? If you are, you better
get *ready.*

Roland opened his eyes again and turned his head to the left again. As he did, he felt something shift against his chest.

Moving very slowly, he raised his right hand out of the sling that held it. The pain in his back stirred and muttered. He stopped moving until he decided the pain was going to get no worse (if he was careful, at least), then lifted the hand the rest of the way to his chest. It encountered finely-woven cloth. Cotton. He lowered his chin to his breastbone and saw he was wearing a bed-dress like the one draped on the body of the bearded man.

Roland reached beneath the neck of the gown and felt a fine chain. A little further down, his fingers encountered a rectangular metal shape. He thought he knew what it was,

but had to be sure. He pulled it out, still moving with great care, trying not to engage any of the muscles in his back. A gold medallion. He dared the pain, lifting it until he could read what was engraved upon it:

James

Loved of family, Loved of GOD

He tucked it into the top of the bed-dress again and looked back at the sleeping boy in the next bed - in it, not suspended over it. The sheet was only pulled up to the boy's ribcage, and the medallion lay on the pristine white breast of his bed-dress. The same medallion Roland now wore. Except ...

Roland thought he understood, and understanding was a relief.

He looked back at the bearded man, and saw an exceedingly strange thing: the thick black line of scar across the bearded man's cheek and nose was gone. Where it had been was the pinkish-red mark of a healing wound ... a cut, or perhaps a slash.

I imagined it.

No, gunslinger,

Cort's voice returned. *Such as you was not made to imagine. As you well know.*

The little bit of movement had tired him out again ... or perhaps it was the thinking which had really tired him out. The singing bugs and chiming bells combined and made something too much like a lullaby to resist. This time when Roland closed his eyes, he slept.

III. Five Sisters. Jenna. The Doctors of Eluria. The Medallion. A Promise of Silence.

When Roland awoke again, he was at first sure that he was still sleeping. Dreaming. Having a nightmare.

Once, at the time he had met and fallen in love with Susan Delgado, he had known a witch named Rhea - the first real witch of Mid-World he had ever met. It was she who had caused Susan's death, although Roland had played his own part. Now, opening his eyes and seeing Rhea not just once

but five times over, he thought: This *is what comes of remembering those old times. By conjuring Susan, I've conjured Rhea of the Coos, as well. Rhea and her sisters.*

The five were dressed in billowing habits as white as the walls and the panels of the ceiling. Their antique crones' faces were framed in wimples just as white, their skin as grey and runnelled as droughted earth by comparison. Hanging like phylacteries from the bands of silk imprisoning their hair (if they indeed had hair) were lines of tiny bells which chimed as they moved or spoke. Upon the snowy breasts of their habits was embroidered a blood-red rose ... the sigil of the Dark Tower. Seeing this, Roland thought: I *am not dreaming. These harridans are real.*

'He wakes!' one of them cried in a gruesomely coquettish voice.

'Oooo!'

'Ooooh!'

'Ah!'

They fluttered like birds. The one in the centre stepped forward, and as she did, their faces seemed to shimmer like the silk walls of the ward. They weren't old after all, he saw - middle-aged, perhaps, but not old.

Yes. They
are *old. They changed.*

The one who now took charge was taller than the others, and with a broad, slightly bulging brow. She bent towards Roland, and the bells which fringed her forehead tinkled. The sound made him feel sick, somehow, and weaker than he had felt a moment before. Her hazel eyes were intent. Greedy, mayhap. She touched his cheek for a moment, and a numbness seemed to spread there. Then she glanced down, and a look which could have been disquiet cramped her face. She took her hand back.

'Ye wake, pretty man. So ye do. 'Tis well.'

'Who are you? Where am I?'

'We are the Little Sisters of Eluria,' she said. 'I am Sister Mary. Here is Sister Louise, and Sister Michela, and Sister

Coquina -'

'And Sister Tamra,' said the last. 'A lovely lass of one-and-twenty.' She giggled. Her face shimmered, and for a moment she was again as old as the world. Hooked of nose, grey of skin. Roland thought once more of Rhea.

They moved closer, encircling the complication of harness in which he lay suspended, and when Roland shrank away, the pain roared up his back and injured leg again. He groaned. The straps holding him creaked.

'Ooooo!'

'It hurts!'

'Hurts him!'

'Hurts so fierce!'

They pressed even closer, as if his pain fascinated them. And now he could smell them, a dry and earthy smell. The one named Sister Michela reached out –

'Go away! Leave him! Have I not told ye before?'

They jumped back from this voice, startled. Sister Mary looked particularly annoyed. But she stepped back, with one final glare (Roland would have sworn it) at the medallion lying on his chest. He had tucked it back under the bed-dress at his last waking, but it was out again now.

A sixth sister appeared, pushing rudely in between Mary and Tamra. This one perhaps *was* only one-and-twenty, with flushed cheeks, smooth skin, and dark eyes. Her white habit billowed like a dream. The red rose over her breast stood out like a curse.

'Go! Leave him!'

'Oooo, my *dear!'* cried Sister Louise in a voice both laughing and angry. 'Here's Jenna, the baby, and has she fallen in love with him?'

'She has!' laughed Tamra. 'Baby's heart is his for the purchase,'

'Oh, so it is!' agreed Sister Coquina.

Mary turned to the newcomer, lips pursed into a tight line. 'Ye have no business here, saucy girl.'

'I do if I say I do,' Sister Jenna replied. She seemed more in charge of herself now. A curl of black hair had escaped her wimple and lay across her forehead in a comma. 'Now go. He's not up to your jokes and laughter.'

'Order us not,' Sister Mary said, 'for we never joke. So you know, Sister Jenna.'

The girl's face softened a little, and Roland saw she was afraid. It made him afraid for her. For himself, as well. 'Go,' she repeated. ‘’Tis not the time. Are there not others to tend?'

Sister Mary seemed to consider. The others watched her. At last she nodded, and smiled down at Roland. Again her face seemed to shimmer, like something seen through a heat-haze. What he saw (or thought he saw) beneath was horrible and watchful. 'Bide well, pretty man,' she said to Roland. 'Bide with us a bit, and we'll heal ye.'

What choice have I?
Roland thought.

The others laughed, birdlike titters which rose into the dimness like ribbons. Sister Michela actually blew him a kiss.

'Come, ladies!' Sister Mary cried. 'We'll leave Jenna with him a bit in memory of her mother, who we loved well!' And with that, she led the others away, five white birds flying off down the centre aisle, their skirts nodding this way and that.

'Thank you,' Roland said, looking up at the owner of the cool hand.. . for he knew it was she who had soothed him.

She took up his fingers as if to prove this, and caressed them. 'They mean ye no harm,' she said ... yet Roland saw she believed not a word of it, nor did he. He was in trouble here, very bad trouble.

'What is this place?'

'Our place,' she said simply. 'The home of the Little Sisters of Eluria. Our convent, if 'ee like.'

'This is no convent,' Roland said, looking past her at the empty beds. It's an infirmary. Isn't it?'

'A hospital,' she said, still stroking his fingers. 'We serve the doctors ... and they serve us.' He was fascinated by the

black curl lying on the cream of her brow - would have stroked it, if he had dared reach up. Just to tell its texture. He found it beautiful because it was the only dark thing in all this white. The white had lost its charm for him. 'We are hospitallers ... or were, before the world moved on.'

'Are you for the Jesus-man?'

She looked surprised for a moment, almost shocked, and then laughed merrily. 'No, not us!'

'If you are hospitallers ... nurses ... where are the doctors?'

She looked at him, biting at her lip, as if trying to decide something. Roland found her doubt utterly charming, and he realized that, sick or not, he was looking at a woman *as* a woman for the first time since Susan Delgado had died, and that had been long ago. The whole world had changed since then, and not for the better.

'Would you really know?'

'Yes, of course,' he said, a little surprised. A little disquieted, too. He kept waiting for her face to shimmer and change, as the faces of the others had done. It didn't. There was none of that unpleasant dead-earth smell about her, either.

Wait,

he cautioned himself. *Believe nothing here, least of all your senses. Not yet.*

'I suppose you must,' she said with a sigh. It tinkled the bells at her forehead, which were darker in colour than those the others wore - not black like her hair but charry, somehow, as if they had been hung in the smoke of a campfire. Their sound, however, was brightest silver. 'Promise me you'll not scream and wake the pube in yonder bed.'

'Pube?'

'The boy. Do ye promise?'

'Aye,' he said, falling into the half-forgotten patois of the Outer Arc without even being aware of it. Susan's dialect. 'It's been long since I screamed, pretty.'

She coloured more definitely at that, roses more natural and lively than the one on her breast mounting in her cheeks.

'Don't call pretty what ye can't properly see,' she said.

'Then push back the wimple you wear.'

Her face he could see perfectly well, but he badly wanted to see her hair - hungered for it, almost. A full flood of black in all this dreaming white. Of course it might be cropped, those of her order might wear it that way, but he somehow didn't think so.

'No, 'tis not allowed.'

'By who?'

'Big Sister.'

'She who calls herself Mary?'

'Aye, her.' She started away, then paused and looked back over her shoulder. In another girl her age, one as pretty as this, that look back would have been flirtatious. This girl's was only grave. 'Remember your promise.'

'Aye, no screams.'

She went to the bearded man, skirt swinging. In the dimness, she cast only a blur of shadow on the empty beds she passed. When she reached the man (this one was unconscious, Roland thought, not just sleeping), she looked back at Roland once more. He nodded.

Sister Jenna stepped close to the suspended man on the far side of his bed, so that Roland saw her through the twists and loops of woven white silk. She placed her hands lightly on the left side of his chest, bent over him ... and shook her head from side to side, like one expressing a brisk negative. The bells she wore on her forehead rang sharply, and Roland once more felt that weird stirring up his back, accompanied by a low ripple of pain. It was as if he had shuddered without actually shuddering, or shuddered in a dream.

What happened next almost *did* jerk a scream from him; he had to bite his lips against it. Once more the unconscious man's legs seemed to move without moving ... because it was what was *on* them that moved. The man's hairy shins,

ankles, and feet were exposed below the hem of his bed-dress. Now a black wave of bugs moved down them. They were singing fiercely, like an army column that sings as it marches.

Roland remembered the black scar across the man's cheek and nose - the scar which had disappeared. More such as these, of course. And they were on him, as well. That was how he could shiver without shivering. They were all over his back. *Battening* on him.

No, keeping back a scream wasn't as easy as he had expected it to be.

The bugs ran down to the tips of the suspended man's toes, then leaped off them in waves, like creatures leaping off an embankment and into a swimming hole. They organized themselves quickly and easily on the bright white sheet below, and began to march down to the floor in a battalion about a foot wide. Roland couldn't get a good look at them, the distance was too far and the light too dim, but he thought they were perhaps twice the size of ants, and a little smaller than the fat honeybees which had swarmed the flowerbeds back home.

They sang as they went.

The bearded man didn't sing. As the swarms of bugs which had coated his twisted legs began to diminish, he shuddered and groaned. The young woman put her hand on his brow and soothed him, making Roland a little jealous even in his revulsion at what he was seeing.

And was what he was seeing really so awful? In Gilead, leeches had been used for certain ailments - swellings of the brain, the armpits, and the groin, primarily. When it came to the brain, the leeches, ugly as they were, were certainly preferable to the next step, which was trepanning.

Yet there *was* something loathsome about them, perhaps only because he couldn't see them well, and something awful about trying to imagine them all over his back as he hung here, helpless. Not singing, though. Why? Because they were feeding? Sleeping? Both at once?

The bearded man's groans subsided. The bugs marched away across the floor, towards one of the mildly rippling silken walls. Roland lost sight of them in the shadows.

Jenna came back to him, her eyes anxious. 'Ye did well. Yet I see how ye feel; it's on your face.'

'The doctors,' he said.

'Yes. Their power is very great, but. . .'She dropped her voice. 'I believe that drover is beyond their help. His legs are a little better, and the wounds on his face are all but healed, but he has injuries where the doctors cannot reach.' She traced a hand across her midsection, suggesting the location of these injuries, if not their nature.

'And me?' Roland asked.

'Ye were ta'en by the green folk,' she said. 'Ye must have angered them powerfully, for them not to kill ye outright. They roped ye and dragged ye, instead. Tamra, Michela, and Louise were out gathering herbs. They saw the green folk at play with ye, and bade them stop, but -,

'Do the muties always obey you, Sister Jenna

She smiled, perhaps pleased he remembered her name. 'Not always, but mostly. This time they did, or ye'd have now found the clearing in the trees.'

'I suppose so.'

'The skin was stripped almost clean off your back - red ye were from nape to waist. Ye'll always bear the scars, but the doctors have gone far towards healing ye. And their singing is passing fair, is it not?'

'Yes,' Roland said, but the thought of those black things all over his back, roosting in his raw flesh, still revolted him. 'I owe you thanks, and give it freely. Anything I can do for you -

'Tell me your name, then. Do that.'

'I'm Roland of Gilead. A gunslinger. I had revolvers, Sister Jenna. Have you seen them?'

'I've seen no shooters,' she said, but cast her eyes aside. The roses bloomed in her cheeks again. She might be a good nurse, and fair, but Roland thought her a poor liar. He was

glad. Good liars were common. Honesty, on the other hand, came dear.

Let the untruth pass for now,
he told himself. *She speaks it out of fear, I think.*

'Jenna!' The cry came from the deeper shadows at the far end of the infirmary - today it seemed longer than ever to the gunslinger - and Sister Jenna jumped guiltily. 'Come away! Ye've passed words enough to entertain twenty men! Let him sleep!'

'Aye!' she called, then turned back to Roland. 'Don't let on that I showed you the doctors.'

'Mum is the word, Jenna.'

She paused, biting her lip again, then suddenly swept back her wimple. It fell against the nape of her neck in a soft chiming of bells. Freed from its confinement, her hair swept against her cheeks like shadows.

'Am I pretty? Am I? Tell me the truth, Roland of Gilead - no flattery. For flattery's kind only a candle's length.'

'Pretty as a summer night.'

What she saw in his face seemed to please her more than his words, because she smiled radiantly. She pulled the wimple up again, tucking her hair back in with quick little finger-pokes. 'Am I decent?'

'Decent as fair,' he said, then cautiously lifted an arm and pointed at her brow. 'One curl's out ... just there.'

'Aye, always that one to devil me.' With a comical little grimace, she tucked it back. Roland thought how much he would like to kiss her rosy cheeks ... and perhaps her rosy mouth, for good measure.

'All's well,' he said.

'Jenna!' The cry
was more impatient than ever. 'Meditations!'

'I'm coming just now!' she called, and gathered her voluminous skirts to go. Yet she turned back once more, her face now very grave and very serious. 'One more thing,' she said in a voice only a step above a whisper. She snatched a

quick look around. 'The gold medallion ye wear - ye wear it because it's yours. Do'ee understand ... James?'

'Yes.' He turned his head a bit to look at the sleeping boy. 'This is my brother.'

'If they ask, yes. To say different would be to get Jenna in serious trouble.'

How serious he did not ask, and she was gone in any case, seeming to flow along the aisle between all the empty beds, her skirt caught up in one hand. The roses had fled from her face, leaving her cheeks and brow ashy. He remembered the greedy look on the faces of the others, how they had gathered around him in a tightening knot ... and the way their faces had shimmered.

Six women, five old and one young.

Doctors that sang and then crawled away across the floor when dismissed by jingling bells.

And an improbable hospital ward of perhaps a hundred beds, a ward with a silk roof and silk walls ...

... and all the beds empty save three.

Roland didn't understand why Jenna had taken the dead boy's medallion from his pants pocket and put it around his neck, but he had an idea that if they found out she had done so, the Little Sisters of Eluria might kill her.

Roland closed his eyes, and the soft singing of the doctor-insects once again floated him off into sleep.

IV. A Bowl of Soup. The Boy in the Next Bed. The Night-Nurses.

Roland dreamed that a very large bug (a doctor-bug, mayhap) was flying around his head and banging repeatedly into his nose - collisions which were annoying rather than painful. He swiped at the bug repeatedly, and although his hands were eerily fast under ordinary circumstances, he kept missing it. And each time he missed, the bug giggled.

I'm slow *because I've been sick,* he thought.

No, ambushed. Dragged across the ground by slow mutants, saved by the Little Sisters of Eluria.

Roland had a sudden, vivid image of a man's shadow growing from the shadow of an overturned freight-wagon; heard a rough, gleeful voice cry, 'Booh!'

He jerked awake hard enough to set his body rocking in its complication of slings, and the woman who had been standing beside his head, giggling as she tapped his nose lightly with a wooden spoon, stepped back so quickly that the bowl in her other hand slipped from her fingers.

Roland's hands shot out, and they were as quick as ever - his frustrated failure to catch the bug had been only part of his dream. He caught the bowl before more than a few drops could spill. The woman - Sister Coquina - looked at him with round eyes.

There was pain all up and down his back from the sudden movement but it was nowhere near as sharp as it had been before, and there was no sensation of movement on his skin. Perhaps the 'doctors' were only sleeping, but he had an idea they were gone.

He held out his hand for the spoon Coquina had been teasing him with (he found he wasn't surprised at all that one of these would tease a sick and sleeping man in such a way; it only would have surprised him if it had been Jenna), and she handed it to him, her eyes still big.

'How speedy ye are!' she said. ‘’Twas like a magic trick, and you still rising from sleep!'

'Remember it, sai,' he said, and tried the soup. There were tiny bits of chicken floating in it. He probably would have considered it bland under other circumstances, but under these, it seemed ambrosial. He began to eat greedily.

'What do 'ee mean by that?' she asked. The light was very dim now, the wall-panels across the way a pinkish-orange that suggested sunset. In this light, Coquina looked quite young and pretty ... but it was a glamour, Roland was sure; a sorcerous kind of make-up.

'I mean nothing in particular.' Roland dismissed the spoon as too slow, preferring to tilt the bowl itself to his lips. In this

way he disposed of the soup in four large gulps. 'You have been kind to me’

'Aye, so we *have!'* she said, rather indignantly.

'- and I hope your kindness has no hidden motive. If it does, Sister, remember that I'm quick. And, as for myself, I have not always been kind.'

She made no reply, only took the bowl when Roland handed it back. She did this delicately, perhaps not wanting to touch his fingers. Her eyes dropped to where the medallion lay, once more hidden beneath the breast of his bed-dress. He said no more, not wanting to weaken the implied threat by reminding her that the man who made it was unarmed, next to naked, and hung in the air because his back couldn't yet bear the weight of his body.

'Where's Sister Jenna?' he asked.

'Oooo!' Sister Coquina said, raising her eyebrows. 'We like her, do we? She makes our heart go . . .' She put her hand against the rose on her breast and fluttered it rapidly.

'Not at all, not at all,' Roland said, 'but she was kind. I doubt she would have teased me with a spoon, as some would.'

Sister Coquina's smile faded. She looked both angry and worried. 'Say nothing of that to Mary, if she comes by later. Ye might get me in trouble.'

'Should I care?'

'I might get back at one who caused me trouble by causing little Jenna trouble,' Sister Coquina said. 'She's in Big Sister's black books, just now, anyway. Sister Mary doesn't care for the way Jenna spoke to her about ye ... nor does she like it that Jenna came back to us wearing the Dark Bells.'

This was no sooner out of her mouth before Sister Coquina put her hand over that frequently imprudent organ, as if realizing she had said too much.

Roland, intrigued by what she'd said but not liking to show it just now, only replied: 'I'll keep my mouth shut about you, if you keep your mouth shut to Sister Mary about Jenna.'

Coquina looked relieved. 'Aye, that's a bargain.' She leaned forward confidingly. 'She's in Thoughtful House. That's the little cave in the hillside where we have to go and meditate when Big Sister decides we've been bad. She'll have to stay and consider her impudence until Mary lets her out.' She paused, then said abruptly: 'Who's this beside ye? Do ye know?'

Roland turned his head and saw that the young man was awake, and had been listening. His eyes were as dark as Jenna's.

'Know him?' Roland asked, with what he hoped was the right touch of scorn. 'Should I not know my own brother?'

'Is he, now, and him so young and you so old?' Another of the sisters materialized out of the darkness: Sister Tamra, who had called herself one-and-twenty. In the moment before she reached Roland's bed, her face was that of a hag who will never see eighty again ... or ninety. Then it shimmered and was once more the plump, healthy countenance of a thirty-year-old matron. Except for the eyes. They remained yellowish in the corneas, gummy in the corners, and watchful.

'He's the youngest, I the eldest,' Roland said. 'Betwixt us are seven others, and twenty years of our parents' lives.'

'How sweet! And if he's yer brother, then ye'll know his name, won't ye? Know it very well.'

Before the gunslinger could flounder, the young man said: 'They think you've forgotten such a simple hook as John Norman. What culleens they be, eh, Jimmy?'

Coquina and Tamra looked at the pale boy in the bed next to Roland's, clearly angry ... and clearly trumped. For the time being, at least.

'You've fed him your muck,' the boy (whose medallion undoubtedly proclaimed him John, Loved of Family, Loved of God) said ‘Why don't you go, and let us have a natter?'

'Well!' Sister Coquina huffed. 'I like the gratitude around here, so I do!'

'I'm grateful for what's given me,' Norman responded, looking at her steadily, 'but not for what folk would take away.'

Tamra snorted through her nose, turned violently enough for her swirling dress to push a draught of air into Roland's face, and then took her leave. Coquina stayed a moment.

'Be discreet, and mayhap someone ye like better than ye like me will get out of hack in the morning, instead of a week from tonight.'

Without waiting for a reply, she turned and followed Sister Tamra.

Roland and John Norman waited until they were both gone, and then Norman turned to Roland and spoke in a low voice. 'My brother. Dead?'

Roland nodded. 'The medallion I took in case I should meet with any of his people. It rightly belongs to you. I'm sorry for your loss.'

'Thankee-sai. ' John Norman's lower lip trembled, then firmed. 'I knew the green men did for him, although these old biddies wouldn't tell me for sure. They did for plenty, and cotched the rest.'

'Perhaps the Sisters didn't know for sure.'

'They knew. Don't you doubt it. They don't say much, but they know *plenty.* The only one any different is Jenna. That's who the old battle-axe meant when she said "your friend". Aye?'

Roland nodded. 'And she said something about the Dark Bells. I'd know more of that, if would were could.'

'She's something special, Jenna is. More like a princess - someone whose place is made by bloodline and can't be refused - than like the other Sisters. I lie here and look like I'm asleep - it's safer, I think - but I've heard 'em talking. Jenna's just come back among 'em recently, and those Dark Bells mean something special ... but Mary's still the one who swings the weight. I think the Dark Bells are only ceremonial, like the rings the old Barons used to hand down

from father to son. Was it she who put Jimmy's medal around your neck?'

'Yes.'

'Don't take it off, whatever you do.' His face was strained, grim. 'I don't know if it's the gold or the God, but they don't like to get too close. I think that's the only reason I'm still here.' Now his voice dropped all the way to a whisper. 'They ain't human.'

'Well, perhaps a bit fey and magical, but-‘

'No!' With what was clearly an effort, the boy got up on one elbow. He looked at Roland earnestly. 'You're thinking about hubber-women, or witches. These ain't hubbers, nor witches, either. *They ain't human!'*

'Then what are they?'

'Don't know.'

'How came you here, John?'

Speaking in a low voice, John Norman told Roland what he knew of what had happened to him. He, his brother, and four other young men who were quick and owned good horses had been hired as scouts, riding drogue-and-forward, protecting a long-haul caravan of seven freightwagons taking goods - seeds, food, tools, mail, and four ordered brides - to an unincorporated township called Tejuas some two hundred miles further west of Eluria. The scouts rode fore and aft of the goods-train in turn and turn about fashion; one brother rode with each party because, Norman explained, when they were together they fought like ... well ...

'Like brothers,' Roland suggested.

John Norman managed a brief, pained smile. 'Aye,' he said.

The trio of which John was a part had been riding drogue, about two miles behind the freight-wagons, when the green mutants had sprung an ambush in Eluria.

'How many wagons did you see when you got there?' he asked Roland. 'Only one. Overturned.'

'How many bodies?'

'Only your brother's.'

John Norman nodded grimly. 'They wouldn't take him because of the medallion, I think.'

'The muties?'

'The Sisters. The muties care nothing for gold or God. These bitches, though . . .' He looked into the dark, which was now almost complete. Roland felt lethargy creeping over him again, but it wasn't until later that he realized the soup had been drugged.

'The other wagons?' Roland asked. 'The ones not overturned?'

'The muties would have taken them, and the goods, as well,' Norman said. 'They don't care for gold or God; the Sisters don't care for goods. Like as not they have their own foodstuffs, something I'd as soon not think of. Nasty stuff ... like those bugs.'

He and the other drogue riders galloped into Eluria, but the fight was over by the time they got there. Men had been lying about, some dead but many more still alive. At least two of the ordered brides had still been alive, as well. Survivors able to walk were being herded together by the,,' green folk - John Norman remembered the one in the bowler hat very well, and the woman in the ragged red vest.

Norman and the other two had tried to fight. He had seen one of hi pards gutshot by an arrow, and then he saw no more - someone had cracked him over the head from behind, and the lights had gone out.

Roland wondered if the ambusher had cried 'Booh!' before he had struck, but didn't ask.

'When I woke up again, I was here,' Norman said. 'I saw that some of the others - most of them - had those cursed bugs on them.'

'Others?' Roland looked at the empty beds. In the growing darkness, they glimmered like white islands. 'How many were brought here?'

'At least twenty. They healed ... the bugs healed 'em ... and then, one by one, they disappeared. You'd go to sleep, and when you woke up there'd, be one more empty bed.

One by one they went, until only me and that, one down yonder was left.'

He looked at Roland solemnly.

'And now you.'

'Norman,' Roland's head was swimming. ‘I-‘

'I reckon I know what's wrong with you,' Norman said. He seemed to speak from far away . . . perhaps from all the way around the curve of I the earth. 'It's the soup. But a man has to eat. A woman, too. If she's a natural woman, anyway. These ones ain't natural. Even Sister Jenna's not natural. Nice don't mean natural.' Further and further away. 'And she'll be like them in the end. Mark me well.'

'Can't move.' Saying even that required a huge effort. It was like moving boulders.

'No.' Norman suddenly laughed. It was a shocking sound, and echoed in the growing blackness which filled Roland's head. 'It ain't just sleepmedicine they put in their soup; it's can't-move-medicine, too. There's nothing much wrong with me, brother ... so why do you think I'm still here?'

Norman was now speaking not from around the curve of the earth but perhaps from the moon. He said: 'I don't think either of us is ever going to see the sun shining on a flat piece of ground again.'

You're wrong about that,

Roland tried to reply, and more in that vein, as well, but nothing came out. He sailed around to the black side of the moon, losing all his words in the void he found there.

Yet he never quite lost awareness of himself. Perhaps the dose of 'medicine' in Sister Coquina's soup had been badly calculated, or perhaps it was just that they had never had a gunslinger to work their mischief on, and did not know they had one now.

Except, of course, for Sister Jenna - she knew.

At some point in the night, whispering, giggling voices and lightly chiming bells brought him back from the darkness where he had been biding, not quite asleep or

unconscious. Around him, so constant he now barely heard it, were the singing 'doctors'.

Roland opened his eyes. He saw pale and chancy light dancing in the black air. The giggles and whispers were closer. Roland tried to turn his head and at first couldn't. He rested, gathered his will into a hard blue ball, and tried again. This time his head *did* turn. Only a little, but a little was enough.

It was five of the Little Sisters - Mary, Louise, Tamra, Coquina, Michela. They came up the long aisle of the black infirmary, laughing together like children out on a prank, carrying long tapers in silver holders, the bells lining the forehead-bands of their wimples chiming little silver runs of sound. They gathered about the bed of the bearded man. From within their circle, candleglow rose in a shimmery column that died before it got halfway to the silken ceiling.

Sister Mary spoke briefly. Roland recognized her voice, but not the words - it was neither low speech nor the High, but some other language entirely. One phrase stood out - can *de lach, mi him en tow - and* he had no idea what it might mean.

He realized that now he could hear only the tinkle of bells - the doctor-bugs had stilled.

'Ras me! On! On!'

Sister Mary cried in a harsh, powerful voice. The candles went out. The light which had shone through the wings of their wimples as they gathered around the bearded man's bed vanished, and all was darkness once more.

Roland waited for what might happen next, his skin cold. He tried to flex his hands and feet, and could not. He had been able to move his head perhaps fifteen degrees; otherwise he was as paralysed as a fly neatly wrapped up and hung in a spider's web.

The low jingling of bells in the black ... and then sucking sounds. As soon as he heard them, Roland knew he'd been waiting for them. Some part of him had known what the Little Sisters of Eluria were, all along.

If Roland could have raised his hands, he would have put them to his ears to block those sounds out. As it was, he could only lie still, listening and waiting for them to stop.

For a long time - for ever, it seemed - they did not. The women slurped and grunted like pigs snuffling half-liquefied feed out of a trough. There was even one resounding belch, followed by more whispered giggles (these, ended when Sister Mary uttered a single curt word - 'Hais!'). And once there was a low, moaning cry - from the bearded man, Roland was quite sure. If so, it was his last on this side of the clearing.

In time, the sound of their feeding began to taper off. As it did, the bugs began to sing again - first hesitantly, then with more confidence. The whispering and giggling recommenced. The candles were re-lit. Roland was by now lying with his head turned in the other direction. He didn't want them to know what he'd seen, but that wasn't all; he had no urge to see more on any account. He had seen and heard enough.

But the giggles and whispers now came his way. Roland closed his eyes concentrating on the medallion which lay against his chest. I *don't know if it's the gold or the God, but they don't like to get too close,* John Norman had said. It was good to have such a thing to remember as the Little Sister drew nigh, gossiping and whispering in their strange other tongue, but the medallion seemed a thin protection in the dark.

Faintly, at a great distance, Roland heard the cross-dog barking.

As the Sisters circled him, the gunslinger realized he could smell them. It was a low, unpleasant odour, like spoiled meat. And what else *would* they smell of, such as these?

'Such a pretty man it is.' Sister Mary. She spoke in a low, meditative tone.

'But such an ugly sigil it wears.' Sister Tamra.

'We'll have it off him!' Sister Louise.

'And then we shall have kisses!' Sister Coquina.

'Kisses for all!' exclaimed Sister Michela, with such fervent enthusiasm that they all laughed.

Roland discovered that not *all* of him was paralysed, after all. Part of him had, in fact, arisen from its sleep at the sound of their voices and now stood tall. A hand reached beneath the bed-dress he wore, touched that stiffened member, encircled it, caressed it. He lay in silent horror, feigning sleep, as wet warmth almost immediately spilled from him. The hand remained where it was for a moment, the thumb rubbing up and down the wilting shaft. Then it let him go and rose a little higher. Found the wetness pooled on his lower belly. Giggles, soft as wind. Chiming bells. Roland opened his eyes the tiniest crack and looked up at the ancient faces laughing down at him in the light of their candles - glittering eyes, yellow cheeks, hanging teeth that jutted over lower lips. Sister Michela and sister Louise appeared to have grown goatees, but of course that wasn't the darkness of hair but of the bearded man's blood.

Mary is hand was cupped. She passed it from Sister to Sister; each licked from her palm in the candlelight.

Roland closed his eyes all the way and waited for them to be gone. Eventually they were.

I'll never sleep again,

he thought, and was five minutes later lost to himself and the world.

V. Sister Mary. A Message. A Visit from Ralph. Norman's Fate. Sister Mary Again.

When Roland awoke, it was full daylight, the silk roof overhead a bright white and billowing in a mild breeze. The doctor-bugs were singing contentedly. Beside him on his left, Norman was heavily asleep with his head turned so far to one side that his stubbly cheek rested on his shoulder.

Roland and John Norman were the only ones here. Further down on their side of the infirmary, the bed where the bearded man had been was empty, it's top sheet pulled up and neatly tucked in, the pillow neatly nestled in a crisp

white case. The complication of slings in which his body had rested was gone.

Roland remembered the candles - the way their glow had combined and streamed up in a column, illuminating the Sisters as they gathered around the bearded man. Giggling. Their damned bells jingling.

Now, as if summoned by his thoughts, came Sister Mary, gliding along rapidly with Sister Louise in her wake. Louise bore a tray, and looked nervous. Mary was frowning, obviously not in good temper.

To *be grumpy after you've fed so well?* Roland thought. *Fie, Sister.*

She reached the gunslinger's bed and looked down at him. 'I have little to thank ye for, sai,' she said with no preamble.

'Have I asked for your thanks?' he responded in a voice that sounded as dusty and little-used as the pages of an old book.

She took no notice. 'Ye've made one who was only impudent and restless with her place outright rebellious. Well, her mother was the same way, and died of it not long after returning Jenna to her proper Place. Raise your hand, thankless man.'

'I can't. I can't move at all.'

'Oh, cully! Haven't you heard it said "fool not your mother 'less she's out of face"? I know pretty well what ye can and can't do. Now raise your hand.'

Roland raised his right hand, trying to suggest more effort than it, actually took. He thought that this morning he might be strong enough to slip free of the slings ... but what then? Any real walking would beyond him for hours yet, even without another dose of 'medicine' . . and behind Sister Mary, Sister Louise was taking the cover from a fresh bowl of soup. As Roland looked at it, his stomach rumbled.

Big Sister heard and smiled a bit. 'Even lying in bed builds an appetite in a strong man, if it's done long enough. Wouldn't you say so, Jason brother of John?'

'My name is James. As you well know, Sister.'

'Do I?' She laughed angrily. 'Oh, la! And if I whipped your little sweetheart hard enough and long enough - until the blood jumped her back like drops of sweat, let us say - should I not whip a different name out of her? Or didn't ye trust her with it, during your little talk?'

'Touch her and I'll kill you.'

She laughed again. Her face shimmered; her firm mouth turned into something that looked like a dying jellyfish. 'Speak not of killing to us cully, lest we speak of it to you.'

'Sister, if you and Jenna don't see eye to eye, why not release her from her vows and let her go her course?'

'Such as us can never be released from our vows, nor be let go. Her mother tried and then came back, her dying and the girl sick. Why, it was we nursed Jenna back to health after her mother was nothing but dirt in the breeze that blows out towards End-World, and how little she thanks us! Besides, she bears the Dark Bells, the sigil of our sisterhood. Of our *ka-tet.* Now eat - yer belly says ye're hungry!'

Sister Louise offered the bowl, but her eyes kept drifting to the shape the medallion made under the breast of his bed-dress. *Don't like it, do* you? Roland thought, and then remembered Louise by candlelight, the freighter's blood on her chin, her ancient eyes eager as she leaned forward to lick his spend from Sister Mary's hand.

He turned his head aside. 'I want nothing.'

'But ye're hungry!' Louise protested. 'If'ee don't eat, James, how will'ee get'ee strength back?'

'Send Jenna. I'll eat what she brings.'

Sister Mary's frown was black. 'Ye'll see her no more. She's been released from Thoughtful House only on her solemn promise to double her time of meditation ... and to stay out of the infirmary. Now eat, James, or whoever ye are. Take what's in the soup, or we'll cut ye with knives and rub it in with flannel poultices. Either way, makes no difference to us. Does it? Louise?'

'Nar,' Louise said. She still held out the bowl. Steam rose from it, and the good smell of chicken.

'But it might make a difference to you.' Sister Mary grinned humourlessly, baring her unnaturally large teeth. 'Flowing blood's risky around here. The doctors don't like it. It stirs them up.'

It wasn't just the bugs that were stirred up at the sight of blood, and Roland knew it. He also knew he had no choice in the matter of the soup. He took the bowl from Louise and ate slowly. He would have given much to wipe but the look of satisfaction he saw on Sister Mary's face.

'Good,' she said after he had handed the bowl back and she had peered inside to make sure it was completely empty. His hand thumped back into the sling which had been rigged for it, already too heavy to hold up. He could feel the world drawing away again.

Sister Mary leaned forward, the billowing top of her habit touching the skin of his left shoulder. He could smell her, an aroma both ripe and dry, and would have gagged if he'd had the strength.

'Have that foul gold thing off ye when yer strength comes back a little - put it in the pissoir under the bed. Where it belongs. For to be even this close to where it lies hurts my head and makes my throat close.'

Speaking with enormous effort, Roland said: 'If you want it, take it. How can I stop you, you bitch?'

Once more her frown turned her face into something like a thunderhead. He thought she would have slapped him, if she had dared touch him so close to where the medallion lay. Her ability to touch seemed to end above his waist, however.

'I think you had better consider the matter a little more fully,' she said. 'I can still have Jenna whipped, if I like. She bears the Dark Bells, but I am the Big Sister. Consider that very well.'

She left. Sister Louise followed, casting one look - a strange combination Of fright and lust - back over her shoulder.

Roland thought, I *must get out of here - I must.*

Instead, he drifted back to that dark place which wasn't quite sleep. Or perhaps he did sleep, at least for a while; perhaps he dreamed. Fingers once more caressed his fingers, and lips first kissed his ear and then whispered into it: 'Look beneath your pillow, Roland ... but let no one know I was here.'

At some point after this, Roland opened his eyes again, half-expecting to see Sister Jenna's pretty young face hovering above him, and that comma of dark hair once more poking out from beneath her wimple. There was no one. The swags of silk overhead were at their brightest, and although it was impossible to tell the hours in here with any real accuracy, Roland guessed it to be around noon. Perhaps three hours since his second bowl of the Sisters' soup.

Beside him, John Norman still slept, his breath whistling out in faint, nasal snores.

Roland tried to raise his hand and slide it under his pillow. The hand wouldn't move. He could wiggle the tips of his fingers, but that was all. He waited, calming his mind as well as he could, gathering his patience.' Patience wasn't easy to come by. He kept thinking about what Norman had said - that there had been twenty survivors of the ambush ... at least to start with. *One by one they went, until only me and that one down yonder was left. And now you.*

The girl wasn't here.

His mind spoke in the soft, regretful tone of Alain, one of his old friends, dead these many years now. *She wouldn't dare, not with the others watching. That was only a dream you had.*

But Roland thought perhaps it had been more than a dream.

Some length of time later - the slowly shifting brightness overhead made him believe it had been about an hour - Roland tried his hand again. This time he was able to get it beneath his pillow. This was puffy and soft, tucked snugly into the wide sling which supported the gunslinger's neck. At first he found nothing, but as his fingers worked their

slow way deeper, they touched what felt like a stiffish bundle of thin rods.

He paused, gathering a little more strength (every movement was like swimming in glue), and then burrowed deeper. It felt like a dead bouquet. Wrapped around it was what felt like a ribbon.

Roland looked around to make sure the ward was still empty and Norman still asleep, then drew out what was under the pillow. It was six brittle stems of fading green with brownish reed-heads at the tops. They gave off a strange, yeasty aroma that made Roland think of early-morning begging expeditions to the Great House kitchens as a child - forays he had usually made with Cuthbert. The reeds were tied with a wide white silk ribbon, and smelled like burned toast. Beneath the ribbon was a fold of cloth. Like everything else in this cursed place, it seemed, the cloth was of silk.

Roland was breathing hard and could feel drops of sweat on his brow. Still alone, though - good. He took the scrap of cloth and unfolded it. Printed painstakingly in blurred charcoal letters, was this message:

NIBBLE HEDS. Once each hour. Too much, CRAMPS or DETH.
TOMORROW NITE. Can't be sooner.
BE CAREFUL!

No explanation, but Roland supposed none was needed. Nor did he have any option; if he remained here, he would die. All they had to do was have the medallion off him, and he felt sure Sister Mary was smart enough to figure a way to do that.

He nibbled at one of the dry reed-heads. The taste was nothing like the toast they had begged from the kitchen as boys; it was bitter in his throat and hot in his stomach. Less than a minute after his nibble, his heart-rate had doubled. His muscles awakened, but not in a pleasant way, as after good sleep; they felt first trembly and then hard, as if they were gathered into knots. This feeling passed rapidly, and his heartbeat was back to normal before Norman stirred

awake an hour or so later, but he understood why Jenna's note had warned him not to take more than a nibble at a time - this was very powerful stuff.

He slipped the bouquet of reeds back under the pillow, being careful to brush away the few crumbles of vegetable matter which had dropped to the sheet. Then he used the ball of his thumb to blur the painstaking charcoaled words on the bit of silk. When he was finished, there was nothing on the square but meaningless smudges. The square he also tucked back under his pillow.

When Norman awoke, he and the gunslinger spoke briefly of the young scout's home - Delain, it was, sometimes known jestingly as Dragon's Lair, or Liar's Heaven. All tall tales were said to orginate in Delain. The boy asked Roland to take his medallion and that of his brother home to their parents, if Roland was able, and explain as well as he could what had happened to James and John, sons of Jesse.

'You'll do all that yourself,' Roland said.

'No.' Norman tried to raise his hand, perhaps to scratch his nose, and was unable to do even that. The hand rose perhaps six inches, then fell back to the counterpane with a small thump. 'I think not. It's a pity for us to have run up against each other this way, you know - I like you.'

'And I you, John Norman. Would that we were better met.'

'Aye. When not in the company of such fascinating ladies.'

He dropped off to sleep again soon after. Roland never spoke with him again ... although he certainly heard from him. Yes. Roland was lying above his bed, shamming sleep, as John Norman screamed his last.

Sister Michela came with his evening soup just as Roland was getting past the shivery muscles and galloping heartbeat that resulted from his second nibble of brown reed. Michela looked at his flushed face with some concern, but had to accept his assurances that he did not feel feverish; she couldn't bring herself to touch him and judge the heat of his skin for herself - the medallion held her away.

With the soup was a popkin. The bread was leathery and the meat inside it tough, but Roland demolished it greedily, just the same. Michela watched with a complacent smile, hands folded in front of her, nodding from time to time. When he had finished the soup, she took the bowl back from him carefully, making sure their fingers did not touch.

'Ye're healing,' she said. 'Soon you'll be on yer way, and we'll have just yer memory to keep, Jim.'

'Is that true?' he asked quietly.

She only looked at him, touched her tongue against her upper lip, giggled, and departed. Roland closed his eyes and lay back against hi pillow, feeling lethargy steal over him again. Her speculative eyes ... he peeping tongue. He had seen women look at roast chickens and joints of mutton that same way, calculating when they might be done.

His body badly wanted to sleep, but Roland held on to wakefulness for what he judged was an hour, then worked one of the reeds out from under the pillow. With a fresh infusion of their 'can't-move-medicine' in his system, this took an enormous effort, and he wasn't sure he could have done it at all, had he not separated this one reed from the ribbon holding the others. Tomorrow night, Jenna's note had said. If that meant escape, the idea seemed preposterous. The way he felt now, he might be lying in this bed until the end of the age.

He nibbled. Energy washed into his system, clenching his muscles and racing his heart, but the burst of vitality was gone almost as soon as it came, buried beneath the Sisters' stronger drug. He could only hope ... and sleep.

When he woke it was full dark, and he found he could move his arms and legs in their network of slings almost naturally. He slipped one of the reeds out from beneath his pillow and nibbled cautiously. She had left half a dozen, and the first two were now almost entirely consumed.

The gunslinger put the stem back under the pillow, then began to shiver like a wet dog in a downpour. I *took too much,* he thought. I'll *be lucky not to convulse -*

His heart, racing like a runaway engine. And then, to make matters worse, he saw candlelight at the far end of the aisle. A moment later he heard the rustle of their gowns and the whisk of their slippers.

Gods, why now? They'll see me shaking, they'll know –

Calling on every bit of his willpower and control, Roland dosed his eyes and concentrated on stilling his jerking limbs. If only he had been in bed instead of in these cursed slings, which seemed to tremble as if with their own ague at every movement!

The Little Sisters drew closer. The light of their candles bloomed red within his closed eyelids. Tonight they were not giggling, nor whispering amongst themselves. It was not until they were almost on top of him that Roland became aware of the stranger in their midst - a creature that breathed through its nose in great, slobbery gasps of mixed air and snot.

The gunslinger lay with his eyes closed, the gross twitches and jumps of his arms and legs under control, but with his muscles still knotted arid crampy, thrumming beneath the skin. Anyone who looked at him closely would see at once that something was wrong with him. His heart was larruping away like a horse under the whip, surely they must see

But it wasn't him they were looking at - not yet, at least.

'Have it off him,' Mary said. She spoke in a bastardized version of the low speech Roland could barely understand. 'Then t'other 'un. Go on, Ralph.'

'U'se has whik-sky?' the slobberer asked, his dialect even heavier than Mary's. Use has 'backky?'

'Yes, yes, plenty whisky and plenty smoke, but not until you have these wretched things off!' Impatient. Perhaps afraid, as well.

Roland cautiously rolled his head to the left and cracked his eyelids open.

Five of the six Little Sisters of Eluria were clustered around the far side of the sleeping John Norman's bed, their candles raised to cast their light upon him. It also cast light upon

their own faces, faces which would have given the strongest man nightmares. Now, in the ditch of the night, their glamours were set aside, and they were but ancient corpses in voluminous habits.

Sister Mary had one of Roland's guns in her hand. Looking at her holding it, Roland felt a bright flash of hate for her, and promised himself she would pay for her temerity.

The thing standing at the foot of the bed, strange as it was, looked almost normal in comparison to the Sisters. It was one of the green folk.

Roland recognized Ralph at once. He would be a long time forgetting that bowler hat.

Now Ralph walked slowly around to the side of Norman's bed closest to Roland, momentarily blocking the gunslinger's view of the Sisters. The mutie went all the way to Norman's head, however, clearing the hags to Roland's slitted view once more.

Norman's medallion lay exposed - the boy had perhaps waken enough to take it out of his bed-dress, hoping it would protect him better so. Ralph picked it up in his melted-tallow hand. The Sister watched eagerly in the glow of their candles as the green man stretched to the end of its chain. . . and then put it down again. Their faces droop in disappointment.

'Don't care for such as that,' Ralph said in his clotted voice. 'Want whik-sky! Want 'backky!'

'You shall have it,' Sister Mary said. 'Enough for you and all you verminous clan. But first, you must have that horrid thing off him! both of them! Do you understand? And you shan't tease us.'

'Or what?' Ralph asked. He laughed. It was a choked and gargly sound the laughter of a man dying from some evil sickness of the throat an lungs, but Roland still liked it better than the giggles of the Sisters 'Or what, Sisser Mary, you'll drink my bluid? My bluid'd drop'ee dead where'ee stand, and glowing in the dark!'

Mary raised the gunslinger's revolver and pointed it at Ralph. 'Take that wretched thing, or you die where you stand.'

'And die after I've done what you want, likely.'

Sister Mary said nothing to that. The others peered at him with their black eyes.

Ralph lowered his head, appearing to think. Roland suspected hi friend Bowler Hat *could* think, too. Sister Mary and her cohorts might, not believe that, but Ralph *had* to be trig to have survived as long as he had. But of course when he came here, he hadn't considered Roland's guns.

'Smasher was wrong to give them shooters to you,' he said at last. 'Give em and not tell me. Did u'se give him whik-sky? Give him 'backky?'

'That's none o' yours,' Sister Mary replied. 'You have that goldpiece off the boy's neck right now, or I'll put one of yonder man's bullets in what's left of yer brain.'

'All right,' Ralph said. 'Just as you wish, sai.'

Once more he reached down and took the gold medallion in his melted fist. That he did slow; what happened after, happened fast. He snatched it away, breaking the chain and flinging the gold heedlessly into the dark. With his other hand he reached down, sank his long and ragged nails into John Norman's neck, and tore it open.

Blood flew from the hapless boy's throat in a jetting, heart-driven gush more black than red in the candlelight, and he made a single bubbly cry. The women screamed - but not in horror. They screamed as women do in a frenzy of excitement. The green man was forgotten; Roland was forgotten; all was forgotten save the life's blood pouring out of John Norman's throat.

They dropped their candles. Mary dropped Roland's revolver in the same hapless, careless fashion. The last the gunslinger saw as Ralph darted away into the shadows (whisky and tobacco another time, wily Ralph must have thought; tonight he had best concentrate on saving his own

life) was the sisters bending forward to catch as much of the flow as they could before it dried up.

Roland lay in the dark, muscles shivering, heart pounding, listening to the harpies as they fed on the boy lying in the bed next to his own. It seemed to go on for ever, but at last they had done with him. The Sisters re-lit their candles and left, murmuring.

When the drug in the soup once more got the better of the drug in the reeds, Roland was grateful ... yet for the first time since coming here, his sleep was haunted.

In his dream he stood looking down at the bloated body in the town trough, thinking of a line in the book marked REGISTRY OF MISDEEDS & REDRESS. *Green folk sent hence,* it had read, and perhaps the green folk *had* been sent hence, but then a worse tribe had come. The Little Sisters of Eluria, they called themselves. And a year hence, they might be the Little Sisters of Tejuas, or of Kambero, or some other far-western village. They came with their bells and their bugs ... from where? Who knew? Did it matter?

A shadow fell beside his on the scummy water of the trough. Roland tried to turn and face it. He couldn't; he was frozen in place. Then a green hand grasped his shoulder and whirled him about. It was Ralph. His bowler hat was cocked back on his head; John Norman's medallion, now red with blood, hung around his neck.

'Booh!' cried Ralph, his lips stretching in a toothless grin. He raised a big revolver with worn sandalwood grips. He thumbed the hammer back

- and Roland jerked awake, shivering all over, dressed in skin both wet and icy cold. He looked at the bed on his left. It was empty, the sheet pulled up and tucked about neatly, the pillow resting above it in its snowy sleeve. Of John Norman there was no sign. It might have been empty for years, that bed.

Roland was alone now. Gods help him, he was the last patient of the Little Sisters of Eluria, those sweet and patient

hospitallers. The last human being still alive in this terrible place, the last with warm blood flowing in his veins.

Roland, lying suspended, gripped the gold medallion in his fist and looked across the aisle at the long row of empty beds. After a little while, he brought one of the reeds out from beneath his pillow and nibbled at it.

When Mary came fifteen minutes later, the gunslinger took the bowl she brought with a show of weakness he didn't really feel. Porridge instead of soup this time ... but he had no doubt the basic ingredient was still the same.

'How well ye look this morning, sai,' Big Sister said. She looked well herself - there were no shimmers to give away the ancient *wampir* hiding inside her. She had supped well, and her meal had firmed her up. Roland, stomach rolled over at the thought. 'Ye'll be on yer pins in no time, I warrant.'

'That's shit,' Roland said, speaking in an ill-natured growl. 'Put me on my pins and you'd be picking me up off the floor directly after. I've start to wonder if you're not putting something in the food.'

She laughed merrily at that. 'La, you lads! Always eager to blame weakness on a scheming woman! How scared of us ye are - aye, way down in yer little boys' hearts, how scared ye are!'

'Where's my brother? I dreamed there was a commotion about him in the night, and now I see his bed's empty.'

Her smile narrowed. Her eyes glittered. 'He came over fevery and pitched a fit. We've taken him to Thoughtful House, which has been home to contagion more than once in its time.'

To the grave is where you've taken him,
Roland thought. *Mayhap that is a Thoughtful House, but little would you know it, sai, one way or another.*

'I know ye're no brother to that boy,' Mary said, watching him eat. Already Roland could feel the stuff hidden in the porridge draining his strength once more. 'Sigil or no sigil, I know ye're no brother to him. Why do you lie? 'Tis a sin against God.'

'What gives you such an idea, sai?' Roland asked, curious to see if she would mention the guns.

'Big Sister knows what she knows. Why not 'fess up, Jimmy? Confession's good for the soul, they say.'

'Send me Jenna to pass the time, and perhaps I'd tell you much,' Roland said.

The narrow bone of smile on Sister Mary's face disappeared like chalkwriting in a rainstorm. 'Why would ye talk to such as her?'

'She's passing fair,' Roland said. 'Unlike some.'

Her lips pulled back from her overlarge teeth. 'Ye'll see her no more, cully. Ye've stirred her up, so you have, and I won't have that.'

She turned to go. Still trying to appear weak and hoping he would not overdo it (acting was never his forte), Roland held out the empty porridge bowl. 'Do you not want to take this?'

'Put it on your head and wear it as a nightcap, for all of me. Or stick it ill your ass. You'll talk before I'm done with ye, cully - talk till I bid you shut up and then beg to talk some more!'

On this note she swept regally away, hands lifting the front of her skirt off the floor. Roland had heard that such as she couldn't go about in daylight, and that part of the old tales was surely a lie. Yet another part was almost true, it seemed: a fuzzy, amorphous shape kept pace with her, running along the row of empty beds to her right, but she cast no real shadow at all.

VI. Jenna. Sister Coquina. Tamra, Michela, Louise. The Cross-Dog. What Happened in the Sage.

That was one of the longest days of Roland's life. He dozed, but never deeply; the reeds were doing their work, and he had begun to believe that he might, with Jenna's help, actually get out of here. And there was the matter of his guns, as well - perhaps she might be able to help there, too.

He passed the slow hours thinking of old times - of Gilead and his friends, of the riddling he had almost won at one Wide Earth Fair. In the end another had taken the goose, but he'd had his chance, aye. He thought of his mother and father; he thought of Abel Vannay, who had limped his way through a life of gentle goodness, and Eldred Jonas, who had limped his way through a life of evil ... until Roland had blown him loose of his saddle, one fine desert day.

He thought, as always, of Susan.

If you love me, then love me,

she'd said ... and so he had.

So he had.

In this way the time passed. At rough hourly intervals, he took one of the reeds from beneath his pillow and nibbled it. Now his muscles didn't tremble so badly as the stuff passed into his system, nor his heart pound so fiercely. The medicine in the reeds no longer had to battle the Sisters' medicine so fiercely, Roland thought; the reeds were winning.

The diffused brightness of the sun moved across the white silk ceiling of the ward, and at last the dimness which always seemed to hover at bed-level began to rise. The long room's western wall bloomed with the rose-melting-to-orange shades of sunset.

It was Sister Tamra who brought him his dinner that night - soup and another popkin. She also laid a desert lily beside his hand. She smiled she did it. Her cheeks were bright with colour. All of them were bright with colour today, like leeches which had gorged until they were almost to bursting.

'From your admirer, Jimmy,' she said. 'She's so sweet on ye! The I means "Do not forget my promise". What has she promised ye, Jimmy brother of Johnny?'

'That she'd see me again, and we'd talk.'

Tamra laughed so hard that the bells lining her forehead jingled. She clasped her hands together in a perfect ecstasy of glee. 'Sweet as honey

Oh, yes!' She bent her smiling gaze on Roland. 'It's sad such a promise can never be kept. Ye'll never see her again, pretty man.' She took the bowl. 'Big Sister has decided.' She stood up, still smiling. 'Why not take that ugly gold sigil off?'

'I think not.'

'Yer brother took his off - look!' She pointed, and Roland spied the gold medallion lying far down the aisle, where it had landed when Ralph threw it.

Sister Tamra looked at him, still smiling.

'He decided it was part of what was making him sick, and cast it away Ye'd do the same, were ye wise.'

Roland repeated: 'I think not.'

'So,' she said dismissively, and left him alone with the empty beds glimmering in the thickening shadows.

Roland hung on, in spite of growing sleepiness, until the hot colours bleeding across the infirmary's western wall had cooled to ashes. Then he nibbled one of the reeds and felt strength - real strength, not a jittery, heart-thudding substitute -bloom in his body. He looked towards where the castaway medallion gleamed in the last light and made a silent promise to John Norman: he would take it with the other one to Norman's kin, if *ka* chanced that he should encounter them in his travels.

Feeling completely easy in his mind for the first time that day, the gunslinger dozed. When he awoke it was full dark. The doctor-bugs were singing with extraordinary shrillness. He had taken one of the reeds out from under the pillow and had begun to nibble on it when a cold voice said, 'So - Big Sister was right. Ye've been keeping secrets.'

Roland's heart seemed to stop dead in his chest. He looked around and saw Sister Coquina getting to her feet. She had crept in while he was dozing and hidden under the bed on his right side to watch him. 'Where did ye get that?' she asked. 'Was it 'He got it from me.'

Coquina whirled about. Jenna was walking down the aisle towards them. Her habit was gone. She still wore her wimple with its foreheadfringe of bells, but its hem rested on the

shoulders of a simple checkered shirt. Below this she wore jeans and scuffed desert boots. She had something in her hands. It was too dark for Roland to be sure, but he thought

YOU,' Sister Coquina whispered with infinite hate. 'When I tell Big Sister -

‘you'll tell no one anything,' Roland said.

If he had planned his escape from the slings which entangled him, he no doubt would have made a bad business of it, but, as always, the gunslinger did best when he thought least. His arms were free in a moment; so was his left leg. His right caught at the ankle, however, twisting, hanging him up with his shoulders on the bed and his leg in the air.

Coquina turned on him, hissing like a cat. Her lips pulled back from teeth that were needle-sharp. She rushed at him, her fingers splayed. The nails at the ends of them looked sharp and ragged.

Roland clasped the medallion and shoved it out towards her. She recoiled from it, still hissing, and whirled back to Sister Jenna in a flare of white skirt. 'I'll do for ye, ye interfering trull!' she cried in a low, harsh voice.

Roland struggled to free his leg and couldn't. It was firmly caught, the shitting sling actually wrapped around the ankle somehow, like a noose.

Jenna raised her hands, and he saw he had been right: it was his revolvers she had brought, holstered and hanging from the two old gunbelts he had worn out of Gilead after the last burning.

'Shoot her, Jenna! Shoot her!'

Instead, still holding the holstered guns up, Jenna shook her head as she had on the day when Roland had persuaded her to push back her wimple so he could see her hair. The bells rang with a sharpness that seemed to go into the gunslinger's head like a spike.

The Dark Bells. The sigil of their ka-tet. *What* –

The sound of the doctor-bugs rose to a shrill, reedy scream that was eerily like the sound of the bells Jenna wore. Nothing sweet about them now. Sister Coquina's hands faltered on their way to Jenna's throat; Jenna herself had not so much as flinched or blinked her eyes.

'No,' Coquina whispered. 'You *can't!'*

'I have,'

Jenna said, and Roland saw the bugs. Descending from the legs of the bearded man, he'd observed a battalion. What he saw coming from the shadows now was an army to end all armies; had they been men instead of insects, there might have been more than all the men who had ever carried arms in the long and bloody history of World.

Yet the sight of them advancing down the boards of the aisle was what Roland would always remember, nor what would haunt his dream for a year or more; it was the way they coated the *beds.* These were turning black two by two on both sides of the aisle, like pairs of dim rectangular lights going out.

Coquina shrieked and began to shake her own head, to ring her bells. The sound they made was thin and pointless compared to the sharp ringing of the Dark Bells.

Still the bugs marched on, darkening the floor, blacking out the be

Jenna darted past the shrieking Sister Coquina, dropped Roland's beside him, then yanked the twisted sling straight with one hard p Roland slid his leg free.

'Come,' she said. 'I've started them, but staying them could be a different thing.'

Now Sister Coquina's shrieks were not of horror but of pain. The bugs had found her.

'Don't look,' Jenna said, helping Roland to his feet. He thought that never in his life had he been so glad to be upon them. 'Come. We mu be quick - she'll rouse the others. I've put your boots and clothes aside the path that leads away from here - I carried as much as I could. How ye? Are ye strong?'

'Thanks to you.' How long he would stay strong Roland didn't know... and right now it wasn't a question that mattered. He saw Jenna snatch up two of the reeds - in his struggle to escape the slings, they had scattered all over the head of the bed - and then they were hurrying up the aisle, away from the bugs and from Sister Coquina, whose cries were now failing.

Roland buckled on his guns and tied them down without breaking stride.

They passed only three beds on each side before reaching the flap of the tent . . . and it was a tent, he saw, not a vast pavilion. The silk walls and ceiling were fraying canvas, thin enough to let in the light of a threequarters Kissing Moon. And the beds weren't beds at all, but only a double row of shabby cots.

He turned and saw a black, writhing hump on the floor where Sister Coquina had been. At the sight of her, Roland was struck by an unpleasant thought.

'I forgot John Norman's medallion!' A keen sense of regret - almost of mourning - went through him like wind.

Jenna reached into the pocket of her jeans and brought it out. It glimmered in the moonlight.

'I picked it up off the floor.'

He didn't know which made him gladder - the sight of the medallion or the sight of it in her hand. It meant she wasn't like the others.

Then, as if to dispel that notion before it got too firm a hold on him, she said: 'Take it, Roland - I can hold it no more.' And, as he took it, he saw unmistakable marks of charring on her fingers.

He took her hand and kissed each burn.

'Thankee-sai,' she said, and he saw she was crying. 'Thankee, dear. To be kissed so is lovely, worth every pain. Now . . .'

Roland saw her eyes shift, and followed them. Here were bobbing lights descending a rocky path. Beyond them he saw the building where the Little Sisters had been living -

not a convent but a ruined *hacienda* that looked a thousand years old. There were three candles; as they drew closer, Roland saw that there were only three sisters. Mary wasn't among them.

He drew his guns.

'Oooo, it's a gunslinger-man he is!' Louise.

'A *scary* man!' Michela.

'And he's found his ladylove as well as his shooters!' Tamra.

'His slut-whore!' Louise.

Laughing angrily. Not afraid ... at least, not of *his* weapons.

'Put them away,' Jenna told him, and when she looked, saw that he already had.

The others, meanwhile, had drawn closer.

'Ooo, see, she cries!' Tamra.

'Doffed her habit, she has!' Michela. 'Perhaps it's her broken vows she cries for.'

'Why such tears, pretty?' Louise.

'Because he kissed my fingers where they were burned,' Jenna said. 'I've never been kissed before. It made me cry.'

'Ooooo!'

'Luv-ly!'

'Next he'll stick his thing in her! Even luv-lier!'

Jenna bore their japes with no sign of anger. When they were done, she said: 'I'm going with him. Stand aside.'

They gaped at her, counterfeit laughter disappearing in shock.

'No!' Louise whispered. 'Are ye mad? Ye know what'll happen!'

'No, and neither do you,' Jenna said. 'Besides, I care not.' She half-turned and held her hand out to the mouth of the ancient hospital tent. It was a faded olive-drab in the moonlight, with an old red cross drawn on its roof.

Roland wondered how many towns the Sisters had been to With this tent which was so small and plain on the outside, so huge and gloriously on the inside. How many towns and over how many years.

Now, cramming the mouth of it in a black, shiny tongue, were doctor-bugs. They had stopped their singing. Their silence was somehow terrible.

'Stand aside or I'll have them on ye,' Jenna said.

'Ye never would!' Sister Michela cried in a low, horrified voice.

'Aye. I've already set them on Sister Coquina. She's a part of the medicine, now.'

Their gasp was like cold wind passing through dead trees. Nor was all that dismay directed towards their own precious hides. What Jenna h done was clearly far outside their reckoning.

'Then you're damned,' Sister Tamra said.

'Such ones to speak of damnation! Stand aside.'

They did. Roland walked past them and they shrank away from him. but they shrank from her more.

'Damned?' he asked after they had skirted the *haci* and reached the path beyond it. The Kissing Moon glimmered above a tumbled scree of rocks In its light Roland could see a small black opening low on the scarp. guessed it was the cave the Sisters called Thoughtful House. 'What did they mean, damned?'

'Never mind. All we have to worry about now is Sister Mary. I like not that we haven't seen her.'

She tried to walk faster, but he grasped her arm and turned her about. He could still hear the singing of the bugs, but faintly; they were leaving the place of the Sisters behind. Eluria, too, if the compass in his head was still working; he thought the town was in the other direction. The husk of the town, he amended.

'Tell me what they meant.'

'Perhaps nothing. Ask me not, Roland - what good is it? 'Tis done, the bridge burned. I can't go back. Nor would if I could.' She looked down, biting her lip, and when she looked up again, Roland saw fresh tears falling on her cheeks. 'I have supped with them. There were times when I couldn't

help it, no more than you could help drinking their wretched soup, no matter if you knew what was in it.'

Roland remembered John Norman saying A *man has to eat... a woman, too.* He nodded.

'I'd go no further down that road. If there's to be damnation, let it be of my choosing, not theirs. My mother meant well by bringing me back to them, but she was wrong.' She looked at him shyly and fearfully ... but met his eyes. 'I'd go beside ye on yer road, Roland of Gilead. For as long as I may, or as long as ye'd have me.'

‘you're welcome to your share of my way,' he said. 'And I am –‘

Blessed by your company,

he would have finished, but before he could, a voice spoke from the tangle of moonshadow ahead of them, where the path at last climbed out of the rocky, sterile valley in which the Little Sisters had practised their glamours.

‘It's a sad duty to stop such a pretty elopement, but stop it I must.'

Sister Mary came from the shadows. Her fine white habit with its bright red rose had reverted to what it really was: the shroud of a corpse. Caught, hooded in its grimy folds, was a wrinkled, sagging face from which two black eyes stared. They looked like rotted dates. Below them, exposed by the thing's smile, four great incisors gleamed.

Upon the stretched skin of Sister Mary's forehead, bells tinkled ... but not the Dark Bells, Roland thought. There was that.

'Stand clear,' Jenna said. 'Or I'll bring the *can tam* on ye.'

'No,' Sister Mary said, stepping closer, 'ye won't. They'll not stray so far from the others. Shake your head and ring those damned bells until the clappers fall out, and still they'll never come.'

Jenna did as bid, shaking her head furiously from side to side. The Dark Bells rang piercingly, but without that extra, almost psychic tone-quality that had gone through Roland's head like a spike. And the doctor-bugs

what Jenna had called the *can tam* - did not come.

Smiling ever more broadly (Roland had an idea Mary herself hadn't been completely sure they wouldn't come until the experiment was made), the corpse-woman closed in on them, seeming to float above the ground. Her eyes flicked towards him. 'And put that away,' she said.

Roland looked down and saw that one of his guns was in his hand. He had no memory of drawing it.

'Unless it's been blessed or dipped in some sect's holy wet - blood, water, semen - it can't harm such as I, gunslinger. For I am more shade than substance ... yet still the equal to such as yerself, for all that.'

She thought he would try shooting her, anyway; he saw it in her eyes. *Those shooters are all ye have,* her eyes said. *Without 'em, you might as well be back in the tent we dreamed around ye, caught up in our slings and awaiting our pleasure.*

Instead of shooting, he dropped the revolver back into its holster and launched himself at her with his hands out. Sister Mary uttered a scream that was mostly surprise, but it was not a long one; Roland's fingers clamped down on her throat and choked the sound off before it was fairly started.

The touch of her flesh was obscene - it seemed not just alive but various beneath his hands, as if it was trying to crawl away from him. He could feel it running like liquid, flowing, and the sensation was horrible beyond description. Yet he clamped down harder, determined to choke the I out of her.

Then there came a blue flash (not in the air, he would think later; that flash happened inside his head, a single stroke of lightning as she touch off some brief but powerful brainstorm), and his hands flew away from h neck. For one moment his dazzled eyes saw great wet gouges in her flesh - gouges in the shapes of his hands. Then he was flung backwards hitting the scree on his back and sliding, striking his head on a jutting rock hard enough to provoke a second, lesser, flash of light.

'Nay, my pretty man,' she said, grimacing at him, laughing with those terrible dull eyes of hers. 'Ye don't choke such as I, and I'll take ye slow yer impertinence - cut ye shallow in a hundred places to refresh my thirst First, though, I'll have this vowless girl ... and I'll have those damned bells off her, in the bargain.'

'Come and see if you can!' Jenna cried in a trembling voice, and shook her head from side to side. The Dark Bells rang mockingly, provokingly

Mary's grimace of a smile fell away. 'Oh, I can,' she breathed. Her mouth yawned. In the moonlight, her fangs gleamed in her gums like bone needles poked through a red pillow. 'I can and I -'

There was a growl from above them. It rose, then splintered into a volley of snarling barks. Mary turned to her left, and in the moment before the snarling thing left the rock on which it was standing, Roland could clearly read the startled bewilderment on Big Sister's face.

It launched itself at her, only a dark shape against the stars, legs outstretched so it looked like some sort of weird bat, but even before it crashed into the woman, striking her in the chest above her half-raise arms and fastening its own teeth on her throat, Roland knew exactly what it was.

As the shape bore her over on to her back, Sister Mary uttered a gibbering shriek that went through Roland's head like the Dark Bells themselves. He scrambled to his feet, gasping. The shadowy thing tore at her, forepaws on either side of her head, rear paws planted on the grave-shroud above her, chest, where the rose had been.

Roland grabbed Jenna, who was looking down at the fallen Sister with a kind of frozen fascination.

'Come on!' he shouted. 'Before it decides it wants a bite of you, too!'

The dog took no notice of them as Roland pulled Jenna past. It had torn

Sister Mary's head mostly off. Her flesh seemed to be changing, somehow - decomposing, very likely - but

whatever was happening, Roland did not want to see it. He didn't want Jenna to see it, either.

They half-walked, half-ran to the top of the ridge, and when they got there paused for breath in the moonlight, heads down, hands linked, both of them gasping harshly.

The growling and snarling below them had faded, but was still faintly audible when Sister Jenna raised her head and asked him, 'What was it? you know - I saw it in your face. And how could it attack her? We all have power over animals, but she has - had - the most.'

'Not over that one.' Roland found himself recalling the unfortunate boy in the next bed. Norman hadn't known why the medallions kept the Sisters at arm's length - whether it was the gold or the God. Now Roland knew the answer. 'It was a dog. Just a town-dog. I saw it in the square, before the green folk knocked me out and took me to the Sisters. I suppose the other animals that could run away *did* run away, but not that one. it had nothing to fear from the Little Sisters of Eluria, and somehow it knew it didn't. It bears the sign of the Jesus-man on its chest. Black fur on white. just an accident of its birth, I imagine. In any case, it's done for her now. I knew it was lurking around. I heard it barking two or three times.'

'Why?' Jenna whispered. 'Why would it come? Why would it stay? And why would it take on her as it did?'

Roland of Gilead responded as he ever had and ever would when such useless, mystifying questions were raised: 'Ka. Come on. Let's get as far as we can from this place before we hide up for the day.'

As far as they could turned out to be eight miles at most ... and probably, Roland thought as the two of them sank down in a patch of sweet-smelling sage beneath an overhang of rock, a good deal less. Five, perhaps. It was him slowing them down; or rather, it was the residue of the poison in the soup. When it was clear to him that he could not go farther without help, he asked her for one of the reeds. She refused,

saying that the stuff in it might combine with the unaccustomed exercise to burst his heart.

'Besides,' she said as they lay back against the embankment of the little nook they had found, 'they'll not follow. Those that are left - Michela, Louise, Tamra - will be packing up to move on. They know to leave when the time comes; that's why the Sisters have survived as long as they have. As We have. We're strong in some ways, but weak in many more. Sister

Mary forgot that. It was her arrogance that did for her as much as the cross-dog, I think.'

She had cached not just his boots and clothes beyond the top of the ridge, but the smaller of his two purses, as well. When she tried apologize for not bringing his bedroll and the larger purse (she'd tried she said, but they were simply too heavy), Roland hushed her with a finger to her lips. He thought it a miracle to have as much as he did. And besides (this he did not say, but perhaps she knew it, anyway), the guns were the only things which really mattered. The guns of his father, and his father before him, all the way back to the days of Arthur Eld when dreams about dragons had still walked the earth.

'Will you be all right?' he asked her as they settled down. The moon had set, but dawn was still at least three hours away. They were surrounded the sweet smell of the sage. A purple smell, he thought it then ... and ever after. Already he could feel it forming a kind of magic carpet under him, which would soon float him away to sleep. He thought he had never been so tired.

'Roland, I know not.' But even then, he thought she had known. Her mother had brought her back once; no mother would bring her back again. And she had eaten with the others, had taken the communion of the Sisters. Ka was a wheel; it was also a net from which none ever escaped.

But then he was too tired to think much of such things ... and what good would thinking have done, in any case? As she had said, the bridge was burned. Even if they were to

return to the valley, Roland guess they would find nothing but the cave the Sisters had called Thoughtful House. The surviving Sisters would have packed their tent of bad dreams and moved on, just a sound of bells and singing insects moving down the late night breeze.

He looked at her raised a hand (it felt heavy), and touched the curl which once more lay across her forehead.

Jenna laughed, embarrassed. 'That one always escapes. It's wayward Like its mistress.'

She raised her hand to poke it back in, but Roland took her fingers before she could. 'It's beautiful,' he said. 'Black as night and as beautiful as forever.'

He sat up - it took an effort; weariness dragged at his body like soft hands. He kissed the curl. She closed her eyes and sighed. He felt her trembling beneath his lips. The skin of her brow was very cool; the dark curve of the wayward curl like silk.

'Push back your wimple, as you did before,' he said.

She did it without speaking. For a moment he only looked at her. Jenna looked back gravely, her eyes never leaving his. He ran his hands through her hair, feeling its smooth weight (like rain, he thought, rain with weight), then took her shoulders and kissed each of her cheeks. He drew back for a moment.

'Would ye kiss me as a man does a woman, Roland? On my mouth?'

Aye.

And, as he had thought of doing as he lay caught in the silken infirmary tent, he kissed her lips. She kissed back with the clumsy sweetness of one who has never kissed before, except perhaps in dreams. Roland thought to make love to her then - it had been long and long, and she was beautiful but he fell asleep instead, still kissing her.

He dreamed of the cross-dog, barking its way across a great open landscape. He followed, wanting to see the source of its agitation, and soon he did. At the far edge of that plain stood the Dark Tower, its smoky stone outlined by

the dull orange ball of a setting sun, its fearful windows rising in a spiral. The dog stopped at the sight of it and began to howl.

Bells - peculiarly shrill and as terrible as doom - began to ring. Dark bells, he knew, but their tone was as bright as silver. At their sound, the dark windows of the Tower glowed with a deadly red light - the red of poisoned roses. A scream of unbearable pain rose in the night.

The dream blew away in an instant, but the scream remained, now unravelling to a moan. That part was real - as real as the Tower, brooding in its place at the very end of End-World. Roland came back to the brightness of dawn and the soft purple smell of desert sage. He had drawn both his guns, and was on his feet before he had fully realized he was awake.

Jenna was gone. Her boots lay empty beside his purse. A little distance from them, her jeans lay as flat as discarded snakeskins. Above them was her shirt. It was, Roland observed with wonder, still tucked into the pants. Beyond them was her empty wimple, with its fringe of bells lying on the powdery ground. He thought for a moment that they were ringing, mistaking the sound he heard at first.

Not bells but bugs. The doctor-bugs. They sang in the sage, sounding a bit like crickets, but far sweeter.

'Jenna?'

No answer ... unless the bugs answered. For their singing suddenly stopped.

'Jenna?'

Nothing. Only the wind and the smell of the sage.

Without thinking about what he was doing (like play-acting, reasoned thought was not his strong suit), he bent, picked up the wimple, and shook it. The Dark Bells rang.

For a moment there was nothing. Then a thousand small dark creatures came scurrying out of the sage, gathering on the broken earth. Roland thought of the battalion marching down the side of the freighter's and took a step back. Then he held his position. As, he saw, the bugs holding theirs.

He believed he understood. Some of this understanding came from his memory of how Sister Mary's flesh had felt under his hands... how it had felt *various,* not one thing but many. Part of it was what she had Said: *I have supped with them.* Such as them might never die but they might *change.*

The insects trembled, a dark cloud of them blotting out the white powdery earth.

Roland shook the bells again.

A shiver ran through them in a subtle wave, and then they began form a shape. They hesitated as if unsure of how to go on, regrouped, began again. What they eventually made on the whiteness of the sand there between the blowing fluffs of lilac-coloured sage was one of Great Letters: the letter C.

Except it wasn't really a letter, the gunslinger saw; it was a curl.

They began to sing, and to Roland it sounded as if they were singing his name.

The bells fell from his unnerved hand, and when they struck ground and chimed there, the mass of bugs broke apart, running every direction. He thought of calling them back - ringing the bell again might do that - but to what purpose? To what end?

Ask me not, Roland. 'Tis done, the bridge burned.

Yet she had come to him one last time, imposing her will over thousand various parts that should have lost the ability to think when the whole lost its cohesion . . . and yet she *had* thought, somehow enough to make that shape. How much effort might that have taken?

They fanned wider and wider, some disappearing into the sage, some trundling up the sides of rock overhang, pouring into the cracks where they would, mayhap, wait out the heat of the day.

They were gone. *She* was gone.

Roland sat down on the ground and put his hands over his face. He thought he might weep, but in time the urge passed; when he raised his head again, his eyes were as dry

as the desert he would eventually come to, still following the trail of Walter, the man in black.

If there's to be damnation,
she had said, *let it be of my choosing, not theirs.*

He knew a little about damnation himself ... and he had an idea that the lessons, far from being done, were just beginning.

She had brought him the purse with his tobacco in it. He rolled a cigarette and smoked it hunkered over his knees. He smoked it down to a glowing roach, looking at her empty clothes the while, remembering the steady gaze of her dark eyes. Remembering the scorch-marks on her fingers from the chain of the medallion. Yet she had picked it up, because she had known he would want it; had dared that pain, and Roland now wore both around his neck.

When the sun was fully up, the gunslinger moved on west. He would find another horse eventually, or a mule, but for now he was content to walk. All that day he was haunted by a ringing, singing sound in his ears, like bells. Several times he stopped and looked around, sure he would see a dark following shape flowing over the ground, chasing after as the shadows of our best and worst memories chase after, but no shape was ever there. He was alone in the low hill country west of Eluria.

Quite alone.